



Looking Back, Dreaming Ahead: Discovering Senegal



Greenery in Senegal (from left: The terrace at OH Gallery in Dakar; Elizabeth Harvey on Gorée Island; the patio at Espace Sobo-Badé). Photos by Elizabeth Harvey and Iva Therene

Before COVID-19, the [Indagare Team](#) was constantly scouting around the world in search of the best new hotels, restaurants, guides and experiences for our community—as well as [emerging destinations](#) to keep on your radar. Exactly one year ago, Associate Editor Elizabeth Harvey and Group Trips Director Iva Therene traveled to the West African nation of Senegal to explore in the capital city, Dakar, and the seaside towns of La Petite Côte. On the brink of an economic boom, yet rooted in tradition and history, Senegal is poised to be one of the decade’s most fascinating destinations. Here, Elizabeth reflects on their discoveries—and shares why Senegal should still be on your travel wishlist.

COVID-19 Update: As of August 12, Senegal is open to American travelers who present a negative COVID test, taken within seven days of their arrival. The State Department and CDC currently have Senegal listed at a Level Three Travel Advisory.

This article originally appeared in the [Spring/Summer 2020 Indagare Magazine](#).



The iconic Mosquée de la Divinité in Dakar. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

With the unforgiving expanses of the Sahara creeping down from above, dense jungles encroaching from below and a host of troubled neighbors to the east, it is easy to forget that Senegal, the westernmost country in mainland Africa, is one of the most stable and welcoming destinations on the continent.

Looking out over the waves of the Atlantic toward the Americas, this small coastal nation has been a hub for voyagers for centuries, absorbing the cultures of the Portuguese, French and Lebanese and blending them with those of Muslim West Africa in the process. The result is a multisensory, complex place that invites its explorers to wander along broad avenues lined with palm trees and politicized graffiti murals, to linger in open-air seaside markets where fishermen heft in their day's catch aboard wooden pirogue boats—to be served, grilled, with spiced rices and an ice-cold La Gazelle beer, by women dressed in printed head scarves—and to speculate at the foundations of modern feats of architecture, soon to rise against a historic, and long impoverished, skyline.

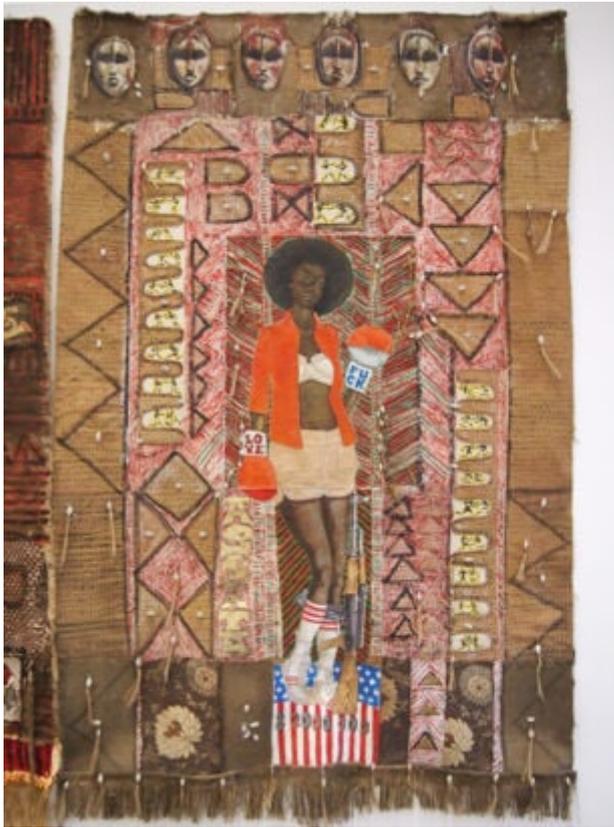
But many travelers do forget about Senegal. When I shared that I would be heading there to scout for Indagare to friends, I was often met with raised eyebrows and vague,

confused smiles. I discovered that there are seasoned explorers who cannot find this enchanting place on the map—and much less know why someone would spend six days there.

The late Anthony Bourdain, who visited to film *Parts Unknown* in 2016, offered this answer: “One can drink a beer nearly anywhere in Senegal. One can choose to wear the traditional hijab—or not. (Most women, from what I saw, do not. The elaborate hair weave seems more the thing.) Senegal is one of the best arguments for travel I can think of.” As per usual, Bourdain was spot-on. **Dakar**—Senegal’s capital city—has in fact long been a popular warm-weather getaway for Europe’s city dwellers. It is particularly frequented by the French, who take advantage of the just-under-six-hour flight from [Paris](#) and shared official language, as Senegal was a French colony until 1960. But now, like [Copenhagen](#), [Lisbon](#) and [Mexico City](#) in the 2010s, Dakar is poised to become the city that everyone is talking about, and traveling to, in the new decade.

Dakar is bursting at the seams with creativity and development; it is an international culture capital being born. This boom is largely thanks to the recent discovery of an oil field—one of the largest found in the last 10 years—just 60 miles off Dakar’s shore. Though the environmental impact of drilling, which is scheduled to begin next year, remains to be seen, its promise of economic growth has attracted a number of developers who are evolving Dakar’s infrastructure to a level that can support an influx of business and luxury travelers.

The modern Blaise Diagne International Airport opened just outside the city in December of 2017, introducing an eight-hour direct Delta flight from New York’s JFK airport. In close pursuit, several top international hotel brands are now in discussion to build properties, including the 462-room **Mövenpick**, scheduled to open in 2021. The Senegalese government is also planning construction for new satellite cities around Dakar—such as **Diarniadio**, which is expected to feature impressive works of abstract architecture at an investment of two billion dollars, and **Akon City**, a cryptocurrency-and-renewable-energy-fueled project envisioned by the popular Senegalese-American hip-hop artist **Akon**, announced in January 2020. Akon isn’t the only African-American celebrity making his mark on the Dakar landscape: **Kehinde Wiley**, who is best known for painting President Barack Obama’s portrait in 2018, established [Black Rock Senegal](#), a sleek artist residency, in the up-and-coming **Yoff** neighborhood, with a lavish launch party attended by the likes of Alicia Keys and Naomi Campbell, just two months before I arrived.



Left: A portion of a tapestry in the Musée des civilisations noires (Museum of Black Civilisations); Right: A moped-turned-planter in the home/gallery of Loman Pawlitschek in Dakar. Photos by Elizabeth Harvey

From rappers and painters to designers like **Aïssa Dione** and filmmakers like **Mati Diop**, Dakar's many creatives are seizing this moment of opportunity to make the rest of the world aware of the astounding richness and diversity of Senegal's artistic traditions. Many look to this summer's 14th edition of **Dak'Art**—a biennial contemporary African art fair [which has since been postponed due to COVID-19]—to inspire the international respect that Dakar's art and design scene deserves, as works by artists from over 30 countries (including seven from Senegal) will sprawl across the city. One of the featured exhibitions will be displayed at the groundbreaking **Musée des Civilisations Noires**, or Museum of Black Civilizations, which opened in December 2018 and already houses several captivating collections, ranging from the tribal to the contemporary.

Of equal power are the city's smaller, private galleries—like those of **Océane Harati** and **Loman Pawlitschek**, two uniquely impressive women in the expatriate crowd who have created contemporary art oases within their stylish homes (worth visiting for the décor alone)—as well as local collectives like the **Village des Arts**. The design scene is also thriving in the areas surrounding Dakar, thanks to artist retreats like **Espace Sobo Badé**. Housed in an enclave of ceramic-tiled buildings that greatly resembles Gaudí's

Parc Güell in [Barcelona](#), Espace Sobo Badé is perched on a cliffside with unbroken views of the ocean, just an hour's drive from Dakar within the town of **Toubab Dialaw**. The town is still quite rustic—it consists mostly of a dirt road lined by workshops and cafés, with dogs and children loitering on doorsteps—but, as my guide informed me: “Five years ago, there was barely a road here. And if you come back in five years, this place will look nothing like what you see now—it will be like Dakar.”

Whether or not these visions for growth and grandeur are realized in the next few years is perhaps beside the point: there is already so much to experience—and savor—in Senegal that warrants booking a flight tomorrow. In Dakar, busy days spent gallery-hopping, touring historical monuments and combing markets for the best, most boldly patterned fabrics can be balanced with hours of lounging on the beach and enjoying leisurely lunches of freshly-caught *thiof*—a local white fish—glazed in a deliciously light sauce of chopped fresh herbs and black pepper (Anthony Bourdain came here for good reason). Evenings must be reserved for observing Dakar's golden hour: watching the sun set over shining Atlantic waves, as a breeze floats over notes from a nearby mbalax performance, where listeners sway to the rhythm of the drums before heading to an expat hot spot like the **Phare des Mamelles** lighthouse for dancing late into the night.

From Dakar, overnight trips can be easily arranged to the **Petite Côte**, a beautiful stretch of coastline that is often referred to as Senegal's French Riviera, thanks to seaside resorts like **Saly** and **Popenguine**, which beckon with buckets of iced rosé, golf courses and vibey beach clubs, as well as historic towns like **St. Louis**, a romantic seaside destination popular for its colonial architecture. Adventure lovers will be no less engaged: in Senegal, travelers can find some of the best surfing in the Atlantic, big-game viewing in **Niokolo-Koba National Park**, hiking in the **Kédougou** region and sand-dune-trekking in the **Lompoul Desert**.



Life, continued, on Gorée Island. Photo by Elizabeth Harvey

This amazing diversity of experiences is hardly surprising, for Senegal is a place of multiplicities. European mansions and churches of Caribbean-pastel hues stand next to Moroccan-style mosques, minarets and gardens; Wolof, the most widely used African language in the country, can be heard in the streets alongside French, sometimes in the same sentence; men clad in long white boubous, or traditional caftans, share benches on the public bus with young women in jean shorts and tank tops; chic boutiques and modern art galleries are fronted by peanut vendors to which milk goats are tethered; and the development of Senegal's cities of the future progresses against the backdrop of the remains of one of Africa's oldest ports—the memory-keeper of the slave trade.

Just a 25-minute ferry ride from Dakar, **Île de Gorée** is undoubtedly Senegal's greatest historical draw. Today, the island buzzes with the movements of everyday life, as many Senegalese live here and keep small businesses like shops, inns and restaurants. It is a place of heat, noise and color, where tropical flowers spring out of every corner and children play pickup games of soccer in the square before jumping into the bay for a swim. But not too long ago, Gorée was the primary port for the export of slaves from Africa. Only two monuments from this period have been preserved in their original state: a 19th-century fort, now a museum, and the **Maison des Esclaves**, one of the island's many French-Colonial homes whose lower chambers were once used to hold

captured Africans in brutal conditions until they were deemed ready to be sent through “the Door of No Return” onto ships that would ferry them into slavery across the Atlantic. For most of these captives, Gorée was their last sight of Africa—their last sight of home. For some, Gorée was the end of the journey: enough captives chose to jump from the gangplanks into the sea, where they would drown, shackled, that sharks began to populate the waters around the island. Of those who boarded, another estimated 15 percent would die on the ships before reaching the Americas (where a new host of horrors awaited).



Left: The courtyard of the Maison des Esclaves; Right: The view from the Door of No Return. Photos by Elizabeth Harvey

Today, to walk through the chambers, peer through the Door and take in this same view is raw and haunting. The weight of ghosts is palpable. But when I shared these thoughts with my Senegalese guide, he only nodded and said: “Yes, this is true. Nevertheless, it is a beautiful island.”

The Senegalese people I met had a uniquely well-adjusted outlook. They don’t take themselves too seriously, and they call things as they are: it is what it is, and life is what you make of it. They welcome guests with open arms, because Senegal, and Dakar in particular, is a true melting pot by virtue of its location—and *teranga*, or hospitality, is one of the most deeply entrenched cultural values.

No one can know what Senegal will look like in 10 or even two years. But even if the dirt roads and the goats are replaced with solar-powered high-rises, it is hard not to believe that the warm essence of the country—the creativity, the tolerance and the *teranga*—will remain.

Senegal: The Indagare Way



A bedroom terrace at the chic boutique hotel Seku Bi in Dakar. Photo courtesy of Seku Bi

- **Where We Went:** Dakar and the Petite Côte cities of Toubab Dialaw and Saly
- **Length of Stay:** Six days
- **Where to Stay:** The **Terrou-Bi** is Dakar's most classic, family-friendly hotel choice and features its own private beach and marina, but lovers of boutique hotels will prefer the new seven-room **Seku-Bi**, a hidden gem with a lovely garden and Mediterranean restaurant in the heart of downtown.
- **Moment to Remember:** Meeting **Océane Harati**, a young, Dakar-born curator who has founded her own gallery for African contemporary art—**OH Gallery**—within the oldest high-rise apartment building in the city. She often hosts salons with the city's top creatives and tastemakers on the gallery's beautiful garden terrace—a true urban jungle of tropical plants and birds.
- **Insider Tip:** **L'Echo-Cotier** in the town of **Popenguine** is known to be one of the best beach clubs on the Petite Côte—and venture to the tiny fishing town of

Somone to experience the beach shack **Chez Norbert**, which serves what are widely considered to be the best oysters around.

Journey with Indagare: We are currently planning our first **Insider Journey** to Senegal for 2021. The itinerary will feature many of the touring highlights mentioned here, as well as special-access moments and meetings with the country's influencers and artists. Group trips for discerning explorers, Insider Journeys open doors to experiences you couldn't have on your own—and introduce you to a community you'll never want to travel without. Contact us at insiderjourneys@indagare.com to learn more about Senegal and our other upcoming trips.

Our [Spring/Summer 2020 Indagare Magazine](#) was nearly complete when large parts of the United States went on lockdown, joining the rest of the world in its battle against COVID-19. We decided that publishing this issue was worthwhile—for several reasons. For one, Indagare was founded by journalists, and you can, therefore, count on us to deliver in-depth reporting and excellent writing. But also, more importantly, we believe that by celebrating these destinations—their cultures and people; their nature and historic treasures—and by capturing them at a particular moment in time, we are sending an intention into the travel universe. When we revisit these places, we may find them changed. But by remembering *Where We Traveled*—through the voices of our contributors, community and team—we believe that we can manifest hope for rediscovering these destinations when we can travel again.

- Elizabeth Harvey on August 19, 2020

