

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Hotel International
BP 1763
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Tunnel at the End of the Light

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Dear Peter,

Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast, invites comparison with Dakar, the other French city of lights on the West African coast. Abidjan is a new city, lacking the charm that Dakar inherits from its past. In 1900, when Dakar was already a thriving commercial center of some 18,000 inhabitants and more than 300 years of history, Abidjan was a fishing village on a lagoon. The year before, a French engineer had selected the spot for the terminus of a railway to the Niger River, setting the stage for what could be a century of fabulous growth.

By 1920, Abidjan and its accompanying port on the ocean formed the colony's second largest city, with 5,370 inhabitants. As the rail line extended inland, more produce came down to the sea, and with it came people. By mid-century, the city held more than 50,000. The opening in 1950 of a canal linking the lagoon directly with the ocean began another series of leaps in population: 125,000 in 1955; 265,000 in 1965. Today, Abidjan, like Dakar, is a city of more than a million inhabitants.

Skyscrapers of glass and steel reflect the bright African sun, and are reflected in turn by the waters of the lagoon. Cars race around the city center and into the surrounding residential sections on three-lane highways, except during rush hours when the traffic slows to a stifling crawl. In this tropical metropolis, commuters clog the streets not only morning and evening but around noon and three p.m. as well, between which hours they take a siesta.

What Abidjan lacks in beauty, it makes up for in organization. City planners have kept ahead of its booming growth. The first plan was written in 1926 and others followed in 1952, 1960 and 1969. Foresight and attention to detail has not only made an attractive central business area, with wide, one-way streets and well-placed parks, but has laid out in orderly rows the residential sections that teem with the thousands of rural migrants who arrive in Abidjan every year.

The city center, called the Plateau, is on a bluff that juts into the lagoon. In place of the pigeons that infest American cities, the Plateau has fruit bats. They fill the sky at dusk when they go out to feed in the surrounding forest. During the day they hang in the Plateau's many trees. When disturbed

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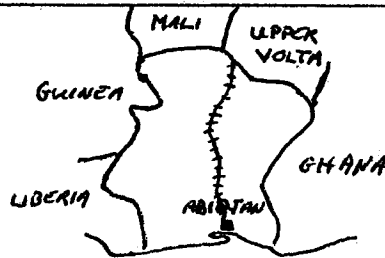
by the sounds of the construction going on all around them, they circle in the air squawking. They do not, as far as I can tell, present the health hazard that pigeons do. The biggest health hazard in Abidjan may be the taxis that career through the traffic. According to the local newspaper, which is running a series of articles on various taxi abuses, of Abidjan's 2,043 metered taxis in 1976, 1,800 had accidents. The city buses seem a much safer way to travel. They are usually grimy, noisy and crowded, but they rumble continuously through the city center in reserved lanes, another example of good urban planning.

North of the Plateau is the lower-class suburb of Adjamé. Like all African quartiers, it is a chaos of people, smells, noise and color. To the east is Cocody, the other extreme. Its ranch-style homes and lush gardens would suit any upper-middle-class neighborhood in Florida or southern California. Cocody is also the site of the symbol of upwardly mobile Abidjan, the five-star Hotel Ivoire, with two high-rise blocks of \$70- and \$80-a-night rooms. Among its numerous recreation facilities is an ice-skating rink, reputedly the only one in tropical Africa.

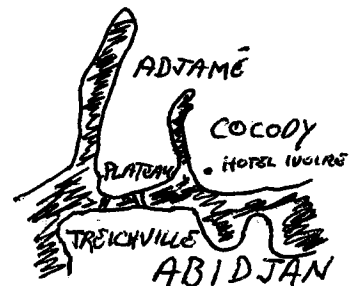
Across the lagoon is Treichville, another lower-class section. Critics of the Ivory Coast's pro-West, capitalistic economy point to it as an example of the inequalities of the system, but it is more attractive than parts of the other West



AFRICA



IVORY COAST



ABIDJAN

African cities I've visited. Nor is it so much worse than run-down sections in older American cities. Traveling between the Plateau and Treichville, I thought of Manhattan's swank Central Park West and rank Amsterdam Avenue, only a block apart.

Treichville's main streets have enclosed sewers, to the Western eye a giant improvement on most West African cities. The dirt side roads may be a bit more fetid, especially during the rainy season from April to November, for the land on the ocean side of the lagoon is low and swampy. On the other hand, Treichville does not have the stagnant pools of bored and restless young men that collect in the poorer sections of most African cities, breeding grounds for diseases that threaten the political health of a state. Treichville is awash with money, and if the flow of wealth leaves a great unevenness in circumstances and opportunities, it keeps people busy trying to get their share. In Dakar, the money has dried up and the poor have become ruthless in their struggle to survive. In Abidjan, people are friendlier because life, still harsh by Western standards, is nevertheless easier than in most other African cities.

The Ivory Coast's gross domestic product per capita is more than \$1,200, high enough to disqualify it from receiving U.S. aid. Despite the criticisms of its socialist detractors, the country distributes its wealth better than any other sub-Saharan African country, according to the World Bank. This wealth has

not come out of a store of mineral reserves like diamonds, gold or oil. The Ivory Coast's fortune grows from its soil. Cocoa, coffee and timber account for about 75 percent of its export earnings. As a French colony, the Ivory Coast grew mainly coffee. After independence, the government developed cocoa as a buffer for years when coffee prices are low. In 1978, the country became the world's top cocoa producer, surpassing neighboring Ghana whose crop production has been headed in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately for the Ivorians, two cash crops are not enough protection against the vicissitudes of the world commodity markets. In the past two years, coffee and cocoa prices have fallen sharply, just as the costs of imported oil and manufactured goods have risen. In 1979, the country ran a deficit in its balance of payments for the first time in many years. Soaring interest rates have also hurt the country, which, as a middle-income developing country, must borrow from commercial banks to pay for many of its development plans.

The Ivory Coast also has problems of its own making. It has been wasteful of its timber resources. Its forest area has shrunk from 9 million hectares at independence to 3 million hectares, and a reforestation program is not going well. So far, rising prices have offset declines in export volume, but the future of the industry is precarious.

The government has mismanaged several development schemes. The most egregious failure is the financially disastrous sugar refineries in the north of the country, but they at least provide the benefit of jobs in an economically depressed area. No such political considerations redeem poor planning in the oil palm industry. The government has had some recent successes, notably in expanding rice production. The country has attained self-sufficiency in this staple crop, an accomplishment that has eluded other West African countries like Sierra Leone.

By all accounts, the country is in for hard economic times, which could put an end to Abidjan's peaceful pursuit of the good life. Three elements of the city's population could become targets for Ivorian frustrations in tougher days ahead: the French, the Lebanese and foreign black Africans.

Fully 50 percent of the adult male population in Abidjan is non-Ivorian. Most of the foreigners have come from poverty-stricken areas of Mali and Upper Volta, but some are refugees from Ghana's economic collapse. Many of the whores who line the sidewalks of Treichville at night are Ghanaians. By and large, the foreigners have been allowed to take the low-paying jobs no Ivorian wants, but violence against the outsiders has erupted several times. Current unemployment figures for Abidjan are unavailable. In the past, unemployment has been estimated at around 20 percent, high by Western standards but probably only half the rate in poorer African cities. If an economic slowdown swells the number of jobless, antagonism between the Ivorian and the immigrant African populations will probably increase.

Of the potential white victims of any reaction to an economic slump, the French are in a more exposed position than the Lebanese. The Lebanese have nothing like the stranglehold on small and middle-sized businesses here that they do in, for example, Freetown. The French, however, do have a firm grip on

big business in the Ivory Coast, and they have not been eager to share the wealth it brings. Few Ivorians reach top management positions in foreign firms. The more than 50,000 French in the Ivory Coast are estimated to send about \$200 million worth of earnings out of the country every year. The French live well here. They rarely take a bus or a taxi, even the young have cars or motorcycles. They live in nice homes with servants. During siesta hours they play tennis or go to a swimming pool, on weekends they take their power boats out on the lagoon.

In 1978, leaflets called for a French bloodbath on the Ivory Coast's national day. The holiday passed without incident. The government said the leaflets were the work of a few French, Lebanese and Ivorian extremists. Most Ivorians show no hostility towards white people. Under the wrong circumstances, that could change.

Abidjan today shows signs of uneasiness. The police have begun sweeps through poorer sections of the city at night, picking up people who cannot produce identity cards. The aim is to remove criminals from the street and illegal immigrants from the country. The average Ivorian probably supports these objectives, but such actions, if heavy-handed, can backfire.

A move that has backfired was the government's recent reduction in salaries for employees of state companies. The government may have been right in claiming that pay raises for these workers had gotten out of hand over the years when the companies were not directly under the government's control. Its attempt to readjust the situation showed poor judgment. Reductions amounted to an average pay cut of 60 percent. Workers in vital industries called illegal strikes and slowdowns and the government quickly changed its plans.

In a controversial book, Le Developpement du Capitalisme en Cote d'Ivoire (1967), economist Samir Amin predicted the Ivory Coast's success in achieving stable growth would last only as long as everybody got something from development, no matter how unequal the rewards were. When hard times squeezed some elements of society out of the chow line, the country would be in for trouble, he warned. Hard times are now upon the Ivory Coast. Government officials see brighter days ahead. Recent offshore discoveries indicate this country could become an oil exporter in a few years. The authorities have to worry about what's going to happen in Abidjan in the meantime.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn

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