

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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U.S. Embassy
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Lagos and Other Cities

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Dear Peter,

After a week in Lagos, I should have lots of tales to tell: going without water and electricity; getting stuck in interminable traffic jams; witnessing armed robberies and lynchings on the street; having my money and property extorted by customs officials, taxi drivers and hotel desk clerks before losing the remainder to the more honestly criminal element.

Alas, nothing ever happens to me. Had I not been better informed before my arrival, I would have said Lagos isn't substantially different from the other capitals along the West African coast. Since coming to this continent 18 months ago, whenever I have told more experienced travelers that Lagos was at the end of my itinerary, I have seen the involuntary, sadistic smile that crosses people's faces when someone slips on a patch of ice. Oh, the stories I've heard.

Lagos is said to be unique, yet I keep drawing comparisons. Just before I left Abidjan, a Reuters correspondent told me Lagos moved at twice the speed of the places I had visited. Such has been the book on this city for at least 30 years. Elspeth Huxley, in her 1954 travelogue, Four Guineas, gave this description:

"Lagos assaults you with its squalor and vitality. The narrow streets, the houses—hovels, mainly—made of mud or old tin and packed as close as playing cards, the stinking open drains, the noise, the traffic, the jostling throngs—Lagos is Eastern in its feeling that sheer naked human life, mere existence, bubbles and pullulates with the frightening fecundity of bacteria."

In a recent reminiscence piece on two years in Africa, New York Times correspondent Gregory Jaynes summed up Lagos in a similar vein: "Stepping off a plane in Lagos is like stepping into a riot—traffic, pollution and a world of hawkers who are everywhere in the jammed alleys and streets."

I don't know of a West African city to which those descriptions couldn't apply. Tired of weaving between strolling pedestrians in my uncontrollable American rush, I was looking forward to living in a place that moved at a faster clip than Abidjan, but Lagosians seem to be in no more of a hurry than the Abi-

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djanese. The only city where I have found myself fighting the jostling throngs is Accra. For swarming humanity, or Huxley's pullulating existence, I think Accra has it all over Lagos.

Nourished by oil revenues since the time of Huxley's visit, Lagos has outgrown naked human life. Its denizens are now wrapped in steel and chrome and speak with the metallic blare of klaxons. Lagos traffic jams—go-slows they're called here—are also the stuff of legends. Circulation has improved since the construction of elevated highways—fly-overs—around the city, but down below the traffic still ties itself into knots at almost every intersection. Hardly surprising, for traffic lights are rare, and those there are don't work. Lagosian drivers make their way as best they can, racing into every empty space that approximates the size of a car, taking advantage of sidewalks, opposing lanes and one-way streets to advance their positions, and keeping a steady hand on the horn to intimidate other drivers.

Again, it's not much different in Abidjan, which has its daily back-ups, and when a power outage shuts down the traffic lights the side streets fill up with such an unending line of cars you'd think no one could ever find the plug. Even in poor little Freetown it takes an hour to crawl out of the city in the afternoon. Americans should feel right at home. I think of Hartford, Connecticut—perhaps one-tenth the size of Lagos, though the number of cars may be nearly equal—and its rush-hour tangles of traffic on the intersecting interstates.

Credit must be given the Lagosians, for I have not seen an accident yet. In Abidjan, I saw them all the time, usually involving at least one taxi. Many of the people behind the wheels in Africa must come from villages where the passing of an automobile, not so long ago if no longer, was a big event. How many of the drivers here had even a bicycle to prepare them for the speed and power that has been put at their feet? My father's generation grew up alongside the car, and I grew up inside one, yet still we make a mess of our highways and our bodies with this familiar invention.

Perhaps I have been lucky. People tell me so. I got through the airport without a hitch. Everyone admits it's better since they opened the new terminal. In the old days, one fought for one's baggage and lost money at every stop. I still heard tales of policemen borrowing travelers' expensive pens to fill the necessary forms and keeping them or demanding a couple dollars to return a passport. I was given a three-month visitor's pass after answering a couple questions. A fellow I have talked with since said he had more trouble getting by immigration even with official U.S. embassy backing. I also expected trouble at customs. After hearing one journalist's story of how an agent tried to take some underwear from his suitcase—loud expressions of outrage averted the move—I left my more valuable possessions in Abidjan. I was therefore shocked to find an exit marked "Nothing to Declare". This is the first African country I've entered without having my bags looked at, except for when I slipped into Upper Volta by train.

I was fortunate to be given the location of a reasonably priced guest house, which in Lagos means under \$50 a night. Stories abound of visitors to the deluxe downtown hotels finding their reservations not honored, rooms going to the highest bid-

der, immediate payment demanded for the full stay (or more) at \$100 a night, with no assurance one won't have to pay again to get back in the room. The American embassy's hotel list has this proviso: "Despite the cost, location or reputation of any of the hotels or guest houses on this list, there may or may not be water, electricity or food, depending on prevailing circumstances. The prices and facilities listed are those given, in most cases, by the manager, but that does not assure what you will find upon your midnight arrival." A Canadian journalist told me he spent a week without water in one of Lagos' best hotels. At my guest house, the water never comes in more than a trickle, but it usually comes. Except for a 24-hour blackout over the weekend, I've had electricity when I've wanted it.

Another assertion I have found to be unreliable concerns the attitude of Lagosians. They are (I was told) arrogant, pushy and greedy. Those I've met so far have been polite, helpful, sometimes friendly, certainly no worse than the average citizen in other cities in West Africa and probably the world over.

Finally, the most awful stories of all—crime in Lagos—had me fearful of venturing out of my room at night or of walking the streets during the day. I have now done both. The streets I find no more threatening than in Freetown or Accra, where one also is aware of the possibility of being robbed. In Freetown, I witnessed several snatch-and-run robberies, including those of two companions. Although armed robbery and murder are on the increase in Abidjan, I felt safer there, probably because the city and its people look more prosperous. For me, Dakar has been the most unfriendly city to walk in, but that may have been because I was newly arrived and showed it. Before coming here, I was warned not to go out at night in Lagos, but I've had the temerity to cross town in a taxi after dark, probably taking the same risk I would be by going out at night in New York, Washington or a dozen other American cities.

People do get murdered in Lagos. One report I read put the homicide rate at about 15 a month. I believe it's about six times that in Los Angeles, which is not that much bigger. (Census counts in Nigeria are notoriously unreliable; the best guess I can give for the population of Lagos is about 3 million). Houses get robbed by armed burglars, who sometimes hold the owners at gunpoint when they come and sometimes leave them dead when they go. Motorists on the road to the airport at night get waylaid by modern highwaymen, a practice that for some reason seems to have gone out with stagecoaches in the West. None of this is different from what goes on in Abidjan or Freetown. Lagos is bigger and wealthier, so it happens more often here.

The Reuters correspondent in Abidjan I spoke with thinks all the stories of mishaps that have befallen people in Lagos over the last decade have been compounded into a body of myths that is self-perpetuating. I think the spread of such grim tales may have a less innocuous impetus. Nigeria, with about 90 million people and billions of dollars in oil revenues, is the only black African nation that can aspire to greatness in this century. Many outsiders, Africans and Westerners alike may want to see it brought down a peg, and so are eager to believe the worst and pass it on. The attitude seems to extend to governments. I read a news article about official protests to Nigeria

from three European countries over various attacks on their nationals in Lagos. Is this a normal diplomatic practice? If so, Washington should be flooded with sealed letters condemning our nation's crime rate. I wonder if the Nigerian government protested the recent knifing of a Nigerian by three London youths in what a police officer called a purely racial murder.

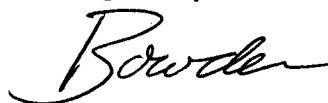
Lagos, I admit, is not a pleasant city. It lacks Dakar's colonial charm, Freetown's scenic beauty, Abidjan's dazzling splendor. Accra, stewing in its misery, is more depressing than Lagos, and I suspect only a homesick American would find much to like in Monrovia. Lagos also brought back memories of home. Going into Lagos Island, the hub of the city, on one of the elevated highways, over sour-smelling bays surrounded by the monstrous structures of industry and a sprawl of cheap housing, I recalled the boroughs of New York. Unfortunately, Lagos Island doesn't provide the respite of a Central Park or the grandeur of Fifth Avenue. The large buildings, new and old, are ugly monuments to wealth and power. The difference between the former French colonial cities and those of the English is that the French built places to live while the English built places to make money. The English never planned on staying long. Abidjan and Dakar show that some thought and taste went into their development; Accra, Freetown and Lagos simply grew in response to commercial pressures.

The poverty that has been engulfed by this growth in Lagos is starker than in New York. The meanness of it, with hardly a trace of present-day comforts, makes the poverty almost medieval in its primitiveness. The most appalling aspect of Lagos is not that it suffers the evils of modern life but that it still embraces a mode of living that is centuries old.

Like other African cities, Lagos is stretching time to the snapping point. Its luckiest and brightest citizens go to Western universities and learn the latest fashions—scientific, technical, artistic, social. They come back and try to build a brave new world on an old and rickety infrastructure: high-rise hotels, with a water system too weak to reach the upper floors; highways full of new cars, but no working traffic lights; corporations doing business over inadequate telephone lines; the adoption of new tools and techniques, without the skilled labor to use them.

People say that Africa needs time to develop, that these are young nations suffering growing pains. Much of the pain comes from trying to develop too quickly, but how to slow it? Africa doesn't have hundreds of years to bring its people out of the Dark Ages as Western Europe did. It won't be left alone to develop its wealth as North America was. Africans must compete on a planet of shrinking resources and ever more dubious tomorrows. Who can blame them if they want as much as they can get today, and devil take the hindmost?

Regards,



Bowden Quinn