

## Ecotouring at *campement* Essamaye

In planning our trip to Senegal, we had no idea what the place would feel like and, as a result, how daring we wanted to be in our itinerary. Stick close to the safety and sophistication of Dakar or head out to the bush? Margaret's hairdresser in Limoux knows Senegal and had useful advice: pick up a tour catalog at the travel agency, see where the French tourists go, then don't go there. "Trust me, I know you," she said. "You would hate it." The US State Department is currently discouraging travel to the Casamance region, which is famous for its rustic ecotourist *campements*. After hours of surfing the excellent site [www.au-senegal.com](http://www.au-senegal.com), we decided that a *campement* in the closer Siné-Saloum region would be just the ticket.





The word *campement* in French simply means a camp, but in Senegal it has come to mean accommodations set up by locals to help tourists sample traditional village life, the very antithesis of Club Med. Margaret found the Essamaye website [www.senegalia.com](http://www.senegalia.com) and

was captivated by the photos and description. Their ability to provide transportation from our hotel in Thiès and then back to Dakar simplified logistics tremendously. We booked for two nights towards the end of our Senegal visit, and it provided a perfect counterpoint to our time spent in bustling Dakar, decaying St. Louis, and busy Thiès. It would be a crime to visit Senegal without experiencing simple village life.

What might we expect from Essamaye? The Siné-Saloum delta is relatively unpopulated, with no cities or even large towns among the swampy islands. Access to the island of Mar Lodj is strictly by pirogue. The island has no electricity other than solar, limited amounts of water are pumped from wells, and island transportation is by foot, horse, or horsecart. The Essamaye *campement* itself is profoundly ecotourist, with structures of pounded earth and policies of conservation and respect for the environment. Tourists help the local economy while enjoying fishing, swimming, or birdwatching. What finally closed the deal for me? Cooking lessons. Let's go!



Owner-host Francois Xavier Diatta picked us up at our hotel in Thiès for the slow drive south. We had spent the previous night at the best hotel in town to break our stays in two *campements*, the first a Mauritanian tent and next at Essamaye. Xavier found us finishing a lush French lunch in the hotel's garden restaurant. As he told us later, he spent the next half-hour fretting as he waited for us in his car. "I found you at this fancy European-style hotel and eating fancy food. I thought by your accent and your name Graff that you were Swiss/French. I was afraid you wouldn't be comfortable in my *campement*. You might be difficult to please." *Au contraire!* Xavier's warm hospitality, the (relatively) comfortable quarters, and the charming village kids of Mar Fafako were major highlights of our Senegal adventures.

If Senegal had 10,000 with Xavier's energy, ambition, and charm, its GDP

growth would rival the USA. After several years working for others in tourism, he struck out on his own several years ago with a partner in France to build a *campement* just like where he grew up. He's found that sharing the simple village life with tourists has its challenges. He tells the story of a French tourist: "No, Madame, you can't use your blow-dryer. It will blow the circuit breakers every time you turn it on." Right you are, Xavier – her hair dryer takes more power than fifty of their low-energy light bulbs. When he's not helping his team accommodate tourists at the *campement*, he runs small-group tours of Senegal. We wouldn't hesitate for a moment to trust him to organize a tour. Meanwhile, he's training a small army of locals to run Essamaye, at the appropriate level of service, in his absence.

Xavier filled the drive – three hours over increasingly potholed roads – with stories of his life and his hopes for the *campement*. We reached the riverside town of Ndangane, greeted by Xavier's *piroguier*, and putted off to the island of Mar Lodj.



As advertised, the *campement* was a round building of *terre battue* – pounded-earth walls with a thatched roof. Ten guest rooms circle the perimeter, opening in to a dirt floor corridor with sunlit garden at the center. There are shining tile floors and walls in the *spotlessly* clean 3-stall shower room and 3-sink toilet/washroom with (surprise!) flush toilets. But please don't flush except for, um, major events – just use a cup of rinsewater – as water is scarce. And please, absolutely no toilet paper down the drain, as it clogs the septic system. There is a simple kitchen: stove with gas canister; the fridge, open and unplugged, serving as a storage cabinet until the tourist season begins in earnest in October. The dining room is a separate thatched-roof terrace by the shore.

Our bedroom had a comfortable mattress on a raised concrete frame, with a mosquito net above and a electric fan on the wall. The mosquitoes (yes, malarial) come out between dark and dawn so we were glad to have the fan's breeze to discourage them and also to cool Margaret, who was still (and always) sweating like a champion. This worked until the power went out middle of the second night, as rain on the previous day had prevented the solar power from fully recharging the batteries.

The ambiance was peaceful. Margaret enjoyed sitting in the courtyard reading, doing Sudoku puzzles, and collecting wandering frogs from our room and the courtyard to deposit into the central garden so they could hop out again, when she wasn't following the financial markets on the solar-powered computer.



Xavier's wife Marie-Hélène remained quietly in the background doing the cooking. Sweet and charming, she is an accomplished tourist-hotel host in her own career. She and Xavier have a young son Philippe, who at age one is already strutting around acting like a guy.

She was Dick's chef-instructor in a morning dedicated to making Yassa Chicken, a Senegalese classic. The chicken had been running around in the

village that very morning. Stew it, then fry it, then sweat the onions (*yassa*) in the same oil until it makes a sauce. Don't forget the Maggi seasoning cube ever-present in Senegalese cuisine. Serve with rice, plenty of the onion sauce, and – why not? – a good local beer. *On mange bien au Sénégal!* The recipe will appear soon in Dick's cookbook.

A visit to the village – two miles by horsecart – was perhaps the highlight of the whole trip. Mar Fafako is home to around 5,000 people: dirt roads, neat but simple homes, a good central water supply, and yes, solar-powered street lamps! But the main attraction was the kids – unspoiled, friendly, charming. If we stopped for a moment walking through the village, one, then two, next four, then eight kids would cluster around, excited to see the *toubabs* and ask (politely) for a little gift. We told them that our gifts would be their photos. Our guide, Essamaye helper Djigane, promised to distribute photos if we sent some back. Even the mamas wanted to get in on the act. We suspect that some of their willingness to pose was due to Djigane's status as a very eligible bachelor. J

