

# France to The Gambia with the “Artful Bodgers” – Jan-Feb 2011

## Spain

### **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

From Candeloup, drove into Spain via Oloron-Ste-Marie and the Somport tunnel. There was snow high up in the mountains but the road was totally clear



In the tunnel Rick was “ticked off” electronically for following too close to me – his registration was flashed up overhead and gave him a fright! He expected to be met at the other end by the constabulary!

Bought diesel in Spain, but not as cheap as usual. Not a lot cheaper than France, in fact.

At Jaca, we called into a supermarket **N 42.57622 W 0.52875** for lunch “stuff” – as I drove into the car park I nearly rammed a police car! That would have been a good start!

A couple of hours later we pulled off the motorway into an industrial area **N 41.774496 W 0.825563** and had a picnic lunch. Very exotic.

After previous fiascos in the Madrid area, due to hopeless road-signs, we were determined to get through unscathed this time. So, with me in front, at about 5pm, in the rush-hour, we entered the melee! And once again we were thwarted! At one particularly confusing junction, I went right and Rick went left! My choice was the M50 going in the wrong direction! I simply came off at the next junction and did a u-turn and was now heading the right way. I had no idea where Rick was but we managed to talk on the phone. Who would get to the “Hostal” “El Queso” first?

By now the fog was getting very dense and 100kms later when I reached the hotel, I sailed straight past, failing to recognise the slip road. It then took me a further 20kms to correct my error, backwards and forwards on the motorway. I would have been there first!

**N 39.61445 W 3.524074**

We booked a room and then demolished our traditional chicken & chips and San Miguels.

Long day – 640kms.

### **Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

An early start after the usual weird Spanish breakfast – *not* including the brandy!

After some spectacular twisty roads in the mountains north of La Carolina (where they are building some amazing new road viaducts through the mountains) we stopped for coffee & fuel at a service area. The place was almost overrun with several coach loads of Japanese tourists, photographing everything – including us!

Fuel stop just before Cordoba - **N 37.89301 W 4.68979**

We had tinned Cassoulet for lunch, cooked at the rear of a motorway service station!

**N 37.45105 W 5.76909** There's a big truck parking area with lots of stray dogs roaming around, and plenty of broken glass, indicating how safe a night-stop that would be!

The next part of our 2011 route was to take us via Cordoba and Seville, so as to avoid the Costa del Sol. (Our friend Tim had fallen foul of the cops there on the 2009 trip.) Both cities were extremely busy with traffic, but we got through without incident.

We reached Algeciras late afternoon. I was frighteningly low on fuel, but had a 5-litre can in the back. The plan was to wait for the cheaper fuel in Morocco. I wished I had taken the opportunity to put the reserve in the tank.

Rick, in the lead, was trying to find "Carlos" the ferry ticket man, **N 36.17926 W 5.44116** using his GPS. This involved, for me, a scary few miles "running on empty", up and down the urban motorways, with no "hard shoulders" to pull onto if I did run out.

We made it. 16:15. And we were then delighted to find that he could get us on the 18:30 fast ferry to Tanger-Med. No overpriced Algeciras hotel!

LIDL, nearby for provisions –  
**N 36.18183 W 5.43959**

The Algeciras dock gate –  
**N 36.13086 W 5.44112**

We sat here for some time before the ferry arrived.

There is no loo in the vicinity! As you pass through the ticket booth, you are confronted by two cameras – one on you, the other on the number plate. A little alarming! And the police check is scary also!



## **Morocco (1500 miles)**

There were only seven cars on the ferry so the passport control on board was very quick, and we sailed through the new docks in about 20 minutes. There is also a swish new terminal building which contains an ATM.

Decided to "go for it", and drove to all the way to Rabat (in the dark) on the new motorway – got there at 23:30. Could not find a hotel room, so we located the Mauritanian Embassy – **N 33.980585 W 6.830676** – and slept there in the cars.



We thought we would be the only ones there!  
Ha! It was like a gypsy camp!

## **Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

In the visa queue by 08:30, but found that the visas would not be available until next day! The official charged with dealing with visa applicants was incredibly rude and abrasive. He came out at 08:50 and handed out forms for everyone to fill in. Our "downloaded" forms

were dismissed. He also handed out numbered bits of paper – like at Tesco’s fish counter. This was a good move – it avoided all the pushing and shoving.

Drove down the coast looking for somewhere to stay – had a “beach brunch” at –  
**N 33.890375 W 7.01219**

Eventually found the “Panorama Hotel” **N 33.91632 W 6.96865** at Témara Plage, south of Rabat – 400dh / twin room (room 201) - for the night



After cooking up some hot-dogs in the car park, much to the amusement of arriving staff, we had a walk to the harbour etc .....



..... but there is NOTHING there in the way of tourist interest!

While having coffee in a local café, a BMW X6 arrived and the owner went into the adjacent supermarket. The car was covered in dents and scratches. Money no object?!?!?!?

The Mercedes has been doing 43mpg up to this point.

## Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2011

Bad news at the Mauritanian Embassy! The visas were NOT available at 09:00. “Come back at 14:00” we were told! So we spent the morning mooching around drinking tea/coffee and visiting an internet café.

(A German guy in the queue was told that HIS visa was going to take ANOTHER 24hrs!)

Finally got on the road at about 14:30, but got lost leaving Rabat and wasted 30 mins or so.



There was a nasty accident just before a tunnel on the new motorway.

Arrived in Mirleft at 23:30 – the hotel was shut but we were let in, and got two rooms for the night. That was a LONG day – 8.5 hrs driving.



The total charge for motorway tolls in Morocco, from Tanger to Agadir, had been about 200dhs.

### Friday 21<sup>st</sup> January 2011

Got fuel in Guelmim and decided to “go for” the Roi Bedouin camp site. **N27.461704 W13.051763**

On this stretch, we handed out 8 fiches to police checkpoints.

Stopped to look at the “big hole” at **N 28.10712 W 12.03749**



Arrived at the campsite just as the sun was going down.

There's a new Belgian owner with his Berber wife. There was an “arsy” French camper from Morlaas, near Pau. Less than interested in my being from Monein! He asked some people in a nearby camper to close their door as their talking was disturbing him! A bunch of rally people then drove around him twice before leaving! Ha-ha! Rick used his tent here for the one and only time – it needed a lot of drying out in the morning!

### Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2011

Left about 10:00. We decided to get as far as Dakhla and see how we felt.

On this stretch, we handed out 4 fiches at 8 police checkpoints.

At the “Topic of Cancer” (sic) petrol station, I had a long conversation about Ireland (I have an Irish passport) with the Saharawi attendant – a very articulate, intelligent guy.

At the Dakhla turn-off, we had a conference and decided to push on to the border, which we got to VERY late, (after a coffee break at the “new” Barabas fuel-stop/hotel) only to find an ENORMOUS queue of cars, most of which were in the Budapest-Bamako rally. Oh how we groaned! We surmised that we could be there for days, while all these vehicles were processed.

The place was alive! Camp-fires, tents, even a “disco”! It was like a small holiday resort. We cooked up a late supper – sausages in lentils – by the cars.



We slept – very comfortably – in the cars.

## Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2011

Rick fried up our breakfast –  
mmmmmm, bacon & eggs!!



The mayhem caused by the Budapest-Bamako rally crowd seemed to work to our advantage. We attached ourselves to the crowd of “passport wavers“, and everyone assumed we were “one of them”, so our documents got “fast tracked”. Not that this actually made a lot of difference!

While negotiating the minefield/no-mans land, we were following a 4x4. In the middle of a soft sand section, the idiot stopped dead and both Rick and I got stuck. We managed to flag down some other 4x4s to pull us out.

## Mauritania



Handed out 6 fiches at 7 police checkpoints.

On the Mauritanian side of the border, the “rally” crowd were **not** afforded any priorities and those that tried to push to the front of the queues were shown the rear. Entry into the country, for us, was without any real problem, except the time taken to process passports and buy insurance.

We finally got started for Nouakchott at 15:15hrs – not enough time to get there in daylight. This was not a prospect that I relished. What struck us both this year was the

total absence of a dust storm, and the fact that the desert was green. Not as green as where I live obviously, but enough to give a green “haze” to the desert. It was an amazing sight. There must have been quite a lot of recent rain to produce this effect. Another facet of the drive south was the tarmac. The edges of the road are crumbling away and it is getting narrower. I expect it will be some time before it disappears completely, but I hope it gets repaired before then.

The last hour or so of the drive was in darkness. My main worry was the possibility of stray animals. I would not like to hit a camel at 120kph! As it was, I nearly drove straight through one police checkpoint, as I failed to see the ramshackle stop sign. The cop accepted my grovelling apology. The “Sahara Auberge” in Nouakchott was a welcome sight.



Within minutes of arrival, I was being pestered by prospective buyers for the car. Rick and I accompanied a few of them across the road to a “café” where we had a chicken-and-chips supper while negotiations proceeded. My price turned out to be too high although it was close. After supper we got a good nights sleep after downing one of our bottles of “Carlos” cider on the porch.

## Monday 24th January 2011

Handed out 3 fiches at 5 police checkpoints.

The drive south toward Senegal was without incident. There were a few checkpoints but Mauritania, for a change, was a “doddle”. A few days later, all hell broke loose on this road when the army caught a group of Al Quaeda insurgents in a 4x4 and, after a gun battle, their vehicle exploded, killing all the occupants. I’m very pleased we missed that!

We found the new “piste” to Diama – start - [N 16.78850, W 16.09947](#) end - [N 16.52955, W 16.23866](#) (t-junction with the old road). In the past we have used the track that starts on the outskirts of the hell-hole that is Rosso. This new route cuts out much of that, as well as **totally** avoiding Rosso. It was not obvious that this **was** in fact the road, but some locals assured us that it was. It is apparently there to service the start of a new water pipeline serving Nouakchott. Half way along we were flagged down by a Renault full of Mauritanians, warning us of a large hole in the road. When we got there, a JCB was shovelling earth into the gap. When I was waved through, I may have inadvertently showered the workers with earth, as I stuffed my right foot down hard to avoid getting stuck! Before joining up with the old road, we passed through the little village of Keur Massène. At the centre, the road forks. The left fork was totally blocked by an enormous combine harvester. We went right! At the junction, we were greeted by smiling soldiers and kids who relieved us of a few bon-bons! At the entrance to the national park, we had the usual nonsense and were relieved of a few euros! Then, the border.

As usual, the Mauritanian side was easy. AND I turned down 1500 euros for the car from an “Arthur Daley” type! We had passed a few



Belgian camper vans, full of hippies, just before, as we didn't want to follow **them** through! And as we were leaving for the Senegal side, they begged us not to pay too much for our passavants – like we would want to! – as they didn't have much cash.

## Senegal

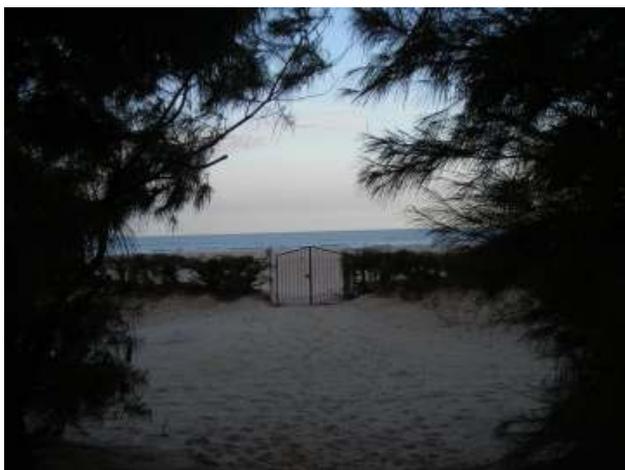
The nonsense on the Senegal side starts with paying 10 euros each to get the barrier lifted! Immigration was done and dusted in 10 minutes with lots of smiles. "Douane" (customs) was another story. To cut a LONG story short, we negotiated the passavant "fee" down to 50 euros each vehicle from an initial 150 euros. Part of the "ceremony" this year involved us being invited into the office – the door being shut on the other people waiting to enter Senegal – where we had lunch with all the customs officers! Bizarre. The only downside was that we could only persuade them to give us a three day passavant. After sorting out our insurance we were on our way.

As usual, a few kms short of St Louis, near the airport, we were pulled over at the police checkpoint. "Mr Happy" could find nothing wrong with the Mercedes or me and I was waved through. Rick on the other hand, was told that there was a "problem" with his passport! It was almost as if the cop had been tipped off by the border officials.

So a Frenchman in a Senegal registered Peugeot who also had a "problem", had a cop sat next to him, holding Rick's passport and, much to my amazement (as I had no idea at this stage what was going on) their two vehicles tore off toward St Louis. I followed, terrified of losing them, as I did not know where they were going. We eventually stopped at the Douaniers HQ, near the Hotel de la Poste. This is the place of nightmares – the sort of place featured in movies where the "hero" is dragged off to, to be tortured. Rick was a little tense.

The Frenchman was dealt with first. Due to having the wrong number plates, his vehicle was confiscated! Rick became a little more tense. It was explained to him by the "chief" that there was no exit stamp in his passport from the last trip, and there was the question of the Land Rover that had not been taken out of Senegal. Gulp. This could be a BIG problem. Rick examined his passport thoroughly, found the stamp and triumphantly pointed it out to the "chief" who now sat forward and might have even blushed. Rick got an apology and we left. Hopefully the cop would get a mouthful from the "chief"! Rick said some very rude words. We went to the Hotel de la Poste for our traditional bottle of Gazelle, and Rick said some more very rude words.

After we had calmed down we made off for the Oasis Hotel on the Langue de Barbarie, south of the town, near the Diamarek Hotel (which we had used twice previously) which was full. We decided on two nights here, for a bit of a rest after the past week. It's a nice enough place and the staff were very friendly and informative.



## **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

Next day we went into town for some money, a stroll around, internet access and phone calls, and did some serious lazing about.

## **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

Left St Louis at 07:45 to try and avoid the early morning traffic cops. No such luck!

Just after stopping for fuel, just south of the town, we were pulled over at another police "gare de peage". Without even looking at the

back of Rick's car, the cop told him that he had a brake light out! The fee was announced to be 40 euros. This was negotiated down to 20. It went, naturally, straight into the pocket, with no receipt. Rick is not a fan of the Senegal constabulary! They are without doubt, the most corrupt on this journey.

We decided to take the road via Touba. This was despite the fact that the previous day was "Magal 2011" – a huge religious festival. The town was due to have been swamped with pilgrims.

As we neared the town, we passed swarms of buses, taxis and donkey carts heading north. I wondered to myself where the bus station was in Touba. I needn't have wondered. Ten minutes later we found it. It was the main road. We had to drive through it. I have never seen anything like it. And I think we were the only white people there. The gaps I squeezed that car through were incredibly small, but one of them was slightly **too** small and I gained a faint blue stripe from a southbound behemoth. Luckily, we got behind one bus that "bulldozed" its way out of the mayhem. Our final memory of Touba was a storm drain full of brown liquid that we had to ford. It must have been 30cms deep and Rick was concerned about the drain holes he had drilled into the Opel!

Kaolack was incredibly busy. One thing that struck me was the huge number of Chinese motorcycles everywhere. The road from there to the border has improved quite a bit, but the final section is still incredibly bad.

Through the border with no problems. And we made VERY sure that there were Senegal exit stamps!



## The Gambia



Collected all our passport stamps on the Gambian side and headed for Eddy's Hotel for the night. This time my room was almost reasonable! We went round the corner to the "Chicken & Chips" place in the market for dinner, and then had a few Julbrew beers in the hotel courtyard, watching the bats and listening to mangoes falling out of the trees onto the hotel roof.

**Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

On the way out of Farrafenni we fell foul of the Military checkpoint on the south side of town. The two of us blundered straight in with the two cars, instead of waiting to be waved in one at a time. The soldier with the AK47 ticking us off was unnerving enough, but then you notice the other one in the "dug-out" with the machine gun pointing straight at you!

An interesting development – Farrafenni now has a bank!

From there we drove down to the ferry. The place was a lot busier than last time – apparently due to the crowds heading home from Touba. There were not many cars however, and so we managed to squeeze onto the first ferry out. There were heavy trucks in a queue that looked several days long. The ferries there are not large.



At Soma we refuelled, after huge detours due to major road works on the “south bank” road. The “price” counter on the pump was not working, but the attendant (who remembered us from last time!) displayed amazing (and accurate!) mental arithmetic skills in calculating the charge.

At one of the ensuing police/army roadblocks a swaggering “Rambo” style cop with an AK47 “volunteered” me to give a couple of soldiers a lift. He also got someone else into Rick’s car without me noticing. It was a surprise to see the guy getting out later on!

I don’t particularly enjoy having strangers in the car, but the main advantage in this case was that we sailed through all the subsequent road blocks and were in Kololi in no time.

One bit of excitement ... in one road works section, there was a small, narrow stretch of deep, soft sand with a turn at the end. I used the normal technique, dropped into 2<sup>nd</sup> gear and stuffed my right foot down and shot through. However, this threw up a big dust cloud and as I came out of the other end, two large vans appeared heading in the opposite direction! They disappeared into the dust, giving me less than five seconds to contemplate Rick coming in from the other side and meeting the vans in the middle. I stopped and watched, transfixed, in my rear view mirror.

Moments later the Opel hurtled sideways out of the dust cloud, as if catapulted, thankfully in one piece. Rick later recounted the sight of the first van suddenly appearing five feet from the front of the Opel. Several rude words were deployed. Rick’s passenger apparently got the fright of his life.

These road works are producing a very nice new road. Hopefully, next time we use it, it will run all the way from Soma to Kololi!

We had decided on the “Timbuktu Guest House”, so headed straight there and checked in.



## Friday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2011 - Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> February 2011

The next few days in Gambia settled into the usual routine of lazing about, trying to sell the car, using the internet, eating, drinking and sleeping.



Our favourite place for eating and drinking became the “Come Inn” on the Kololi Road, near the “Palma Rima” crossroad.

Always had a pleasant evening there, except that is for the evening of Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> February.

Following a complaint from the neighbour (who works for the tourist office!) there was a heavy-handed police “raid” because of the live band! About 10 cops marched in, the one in charge shouting “place him under arrest!”, and the owner was frog-marched out, thrown in a van

and carted off to Police HQ. Thankfully he was back within an hour, but it showed the nasty side of the Gambian Police.

Before starting the trip I had been in touch with Sineta George from Dakar (Senegal), who had expressed an interest in the Mercedes. I now contacted her and a few days later Rick and I met her and her friends at the ferry terminal in Banjul. She had come down for the day to check out the car. To cut a long story short, she bought the car. We later gave Elijah (her “man” in Gambia) and the mechanic a lift to Senegambia, and the next day took the car down to Kartong where Elijah lives.

Phew! I was now able to book my flight home.

## Monday 7<sup>th</sup> February 2011

I left the Timbuktu apartments in Kololi at about 08:00 in a “green” taxi. The fare had been agreed at 250 dalasi. Tourist-ish price! Traffic was awful as the traffic light was out of order and on top of that it was, of course, the rush hour. It took about 30 minutes to get to the ferry terminal. There was mayhem outside the port – just the normal comings and goings. The driver helped me get a ticket – 10 dalasi for me and 10 dalasi for my (big) bag. That’s about 50 centimes for the crossing to Barra. Two ferries were working and so my wait was about 30 minutes. After the vehicles had been loaded, as soon as the doors to the passenger terminal

were opened, everyone swarmed out, along the dock, and onto the ferry. I made my way to the very top deck so as to keep in the “fresh” air. There were no seats available, so I stood for the one hour journey.

Barra is far from being my favourite destination. Rick and I have always tried to avoid the place, following the events of January 2007 with Tim & Keith. So the sign “Welcome to Barra” was a bit ironic. As you disembark, you then have to walk the entire length of the compound – about 500M – all the time fighting off the attentions of the hustlers and touts that infest the place. You then reach the taxi compound where you haggle over the fare to the border at Kerang. I think paid about 150 dalasi, and shared the cab with two ladies.



The Gambian border officials were not a problem, and I got my passport stamped very quickly. The next thing that happens is the hustlers trying to get your bags into their wheelbarrows to travel the 100m to the Senegalese border post. I managed without them. The Senegal stamp was just as easy to get. It was a change to traverse a border without paying anything! I then got involved in the fracas over another taxi to the “sept-place” garage. About six drivers and the same number of touts, started fighting over the pleasure of my business/company. There was a LOT of pushing and shoving and it almost came to blows. For 1000CFA I was transported the km or two to where the “long distance” vehicles depart. The choice was Kaolack or Dakar. Once again, there was a near riot between competing drivers, anxious to convey me to the nation’s capital. The vehicles are ancient Peugeot 504 estate cars, adapted to carry seven passengers plus the driver. Cosy! The fare for me plus my luggage was 8000CFA (about 12 euros) for the 300km journey. I was lucky enough to get the front seat.

Within 10kms of leaving the border, there were two police/douane checkpoints where everyone had to leave the car and get their luggage searched. I had to explain what a power inverter was and another guy had, inexplicably, a pair of flip-flops confiscated. These people are a law unto themselves! The journey was otherwise uneventful. However, all the time I was in the car I was worrying about my financial situation. My only possible sources of money now were my Mastercard cards. These are not accepted in Gambia and I was now down to 3000CFA (about five euros).



On the outskirts of Dakar, the traffic and pollution were awful. After the previous three weeks of wide open spaces, it was horrible. Dakar is like an ants nest. Near the airport, before the driver turned into the city, I was dropped off to get a cab to the airport. I negotiated a fare of 2000CFA.

I was now down to my last 1000CFA. Would the ATM at the airport accept one of my cards? Thankfully yes! I could now get a “Gazelle” beer and something to eat while planning my next move. Porters/touts/hustlers infest the airport and I spent much of my time there fighting them off.

Sineta George, the lady from Dakar who had bought the Mercedes, has a B&B ten minutes from the airport, so I decided to pop round and say hello. I had got a picture of Yoff, the northern Dakar suburb where she lives, in my head. The reality could not have been more different. I was glad not to have been staying there. It is the epitome of urban sprawl with dual carriageway roads and apartment blocks. A long way from the quiet seaside “village” I had imagined after reading the guide-books.

## Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2011



After paying my respects, I had a pizza in a nearby “food mall” and watched the world go by for a couple of hours before returning to the airport. My Royal Air Maroc flight was not due to leave until 06:15 – check in opened at 03:00 – so it was not worth finding a hotel. I drank a LOT of coffee! I got my big bag shrink-wrapped for security and forgot to put my camping knife/spoon in. This was confiscated at the security check, along with two rechargeable batteries and a lighter! I got a window seat and had a couple of hours sleep on the way to Casablanca.

I spent the four hours in Casablanca wandering round the duty-free shops – there are MANY! – and drinking more coffee.

The flight to Toulouse was equally uneventful and touched down on time, and I got into town and caught a train back to Pau.