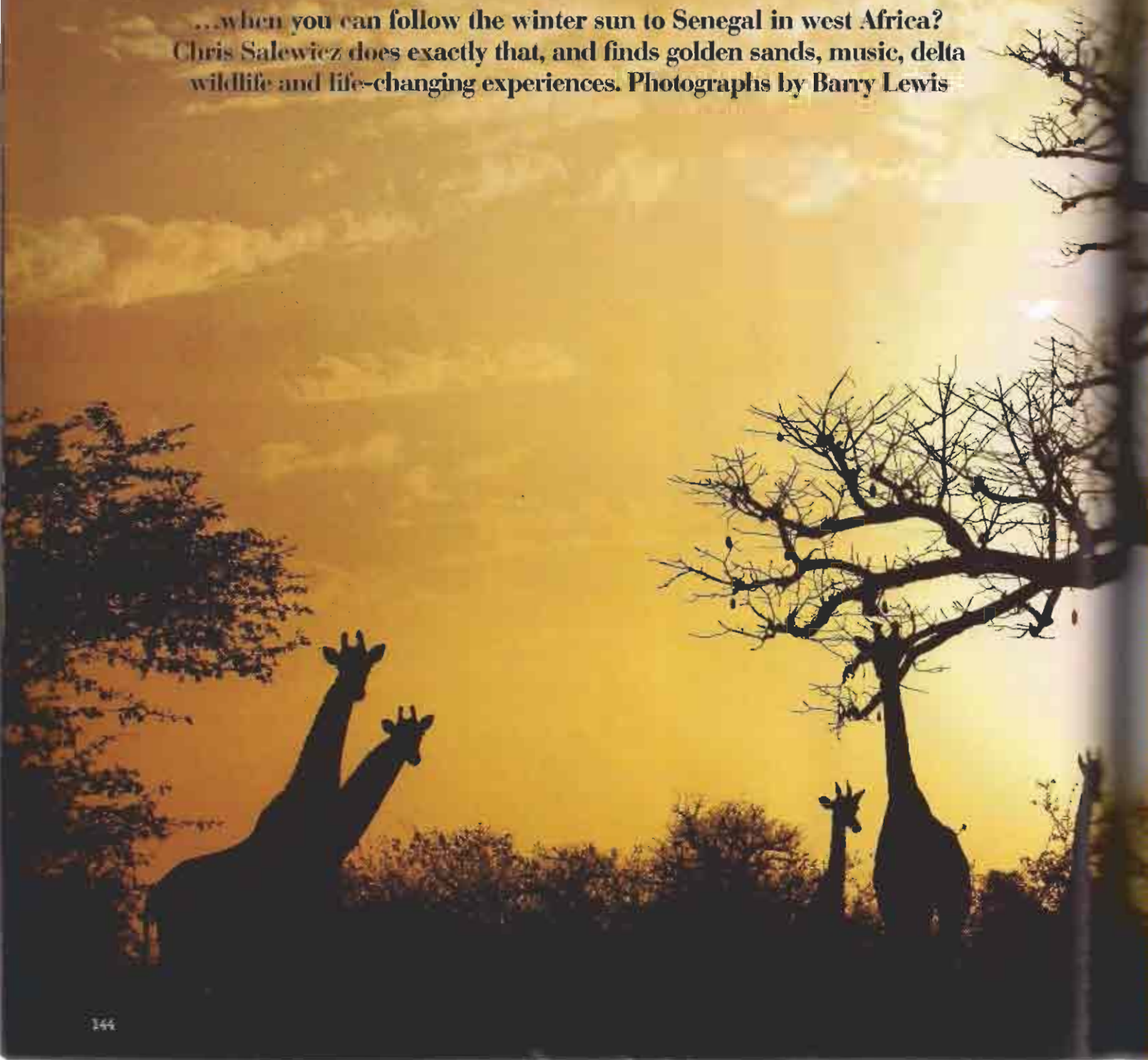
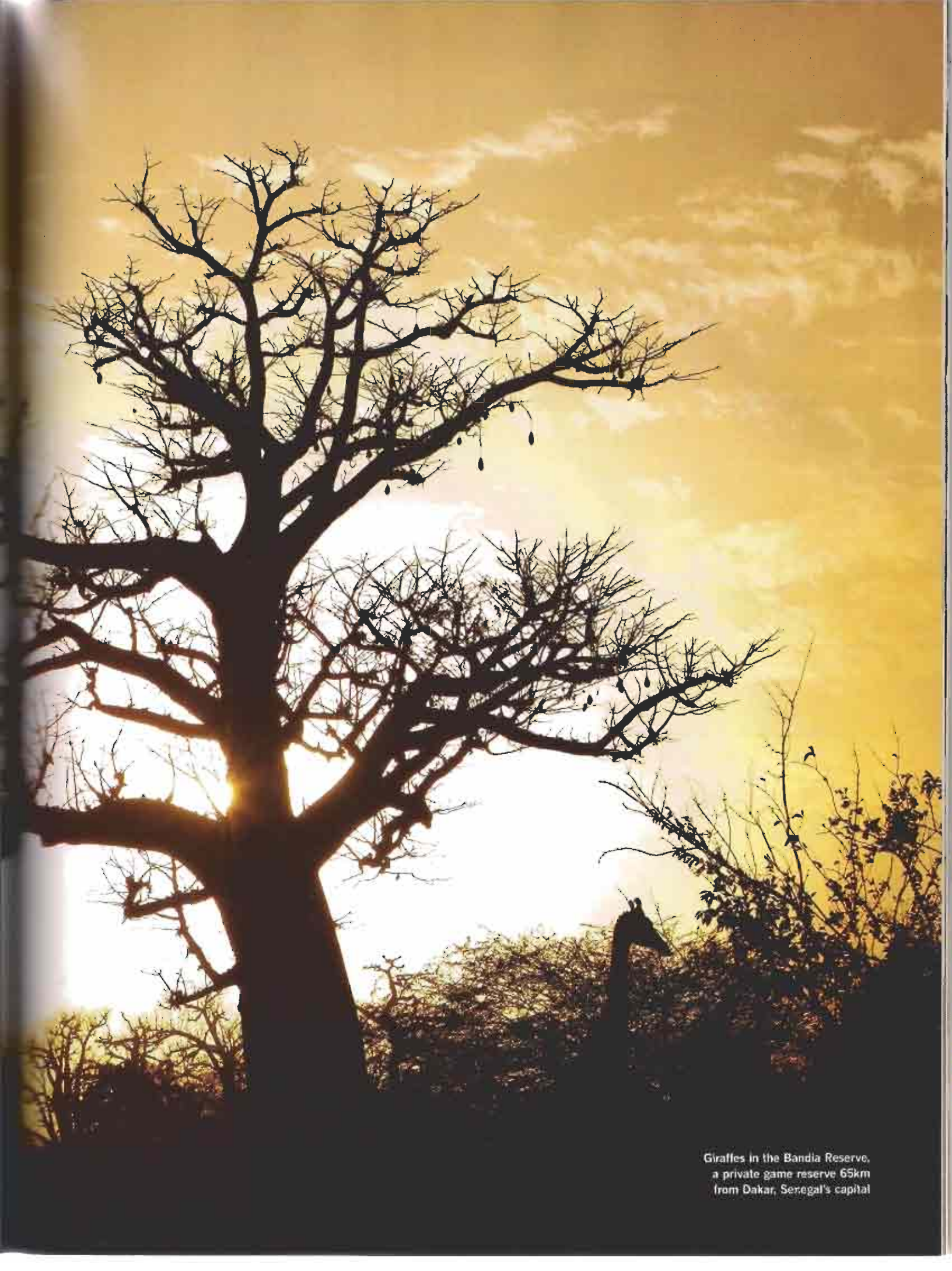


Why follow the herd

...when you can follow the winter sun to Senegal in west Africa? Chris Salewicz does exactly that, and finds golden sands, music, delta wildlife and life-changing experiences. Photographs by Barry Lewis





Giraffes in the Bandia Reserve,
a private game reserve 65km
from Dakar, Senegal's capital



Clockwise from left: football on the main square of Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar; surfing off Dakar's Ngor Beach; street seller on Gorée. Opposite, boatman on the Petite Côte



EDGING PAST A HERD OF grazing goats outside the fishing village of Toubab Dialaw, I descend on a rough path down steep, sandy cliffs; beneath me is a picture-postcard expanse of almost deserted beach that extends far into the distance. Wading out into the sea, I can feel the potency of the Atlantic waves, their force. But it is mid-January and this is my first day in warm Senegal from wintry London, so I'm seduced by the agreeable temperature of the water. I cast off with what I imagine is a calm breast-stroke.

After only moments, however, a powerful breaker dashes me to the seabed, painfully knocking my forehead and nose into the sand before flipping me over, wrenching my back. If there had been rocks, I would have been in big trouble. I'm instantly reminded that, some years ago, a friend swimming in the Senegalese winter sea had been hit in the face by a wave with such ferocity it had detached one of her retinas.

Only that morning I had met surfers who adore the Senegalese coastline and its powerful sea; but that water, its power undiminished by any offshore reef, contains enormous strength. And, clearly, it is to be treated with utmost respect.

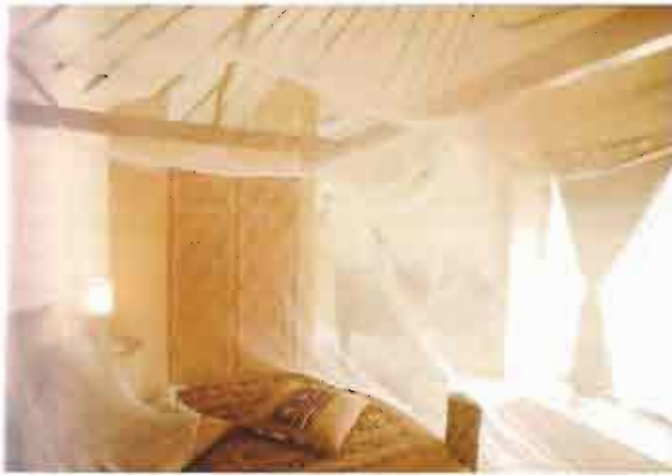
Drying off, a little shaken, I head for an imposing property on a promontory at the southern end of the beach: the Espace Sobo

Badé hotel. It is a place so serene I immediately forget my mishap. A multi-level complex, with beautiful Gaudi-like mosaic tiles on the exterior walls, numerous stone sculptures, sensuous plant life, and incense wafting in the wind, the Sobo Badé is a mesmerising example of rockstar rococo – the sort of place where you might expect to find Brian Jones. Designed by a Haitian artist, each room is a small house, some in towered structures. 'Are there any available?' I ask. 'Bien sur!' comes the reply.

I have come to Toubab Dialaw on the recommendation of Baaba Maal, the Senegalese master-musician; he owns a house in the village. It was Maal who had first brought me to the West African nation of Senegal in 1993, when I was making a film about him. After spending time in Dakar, the hectic capital, I travelled with him to the north of the country; we visited the French colonial capital of St Louis, and his hometown of Podor, Senegal's most northerly point, on the banks of the River Senegal, which forms the border with Mauritania.

I was struck then by the country's benign atmosphere. When a French friend remarked that '*Senegal: c'est toute une poeme*', I could only agree. The Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka told me how Léopold Senghor, the first president after independence,





Clockwise from top left: bedroom at the Royal Lodge hotel; pelican; schoolchildren on Joal-Fadiout bridge. Opposite, paddling a traditional pirogue through the delta

had been a poet, and how Senghor's creative vision had influenced the progress of his post-colonial nation.

So I thought I should return to Senegal, and chose January as the ideal time because the country offers chic possibilities for winter sun, and is popular with the French but not overrun with British visitors. There was a question mark in my mind, though: would a holiday in Senegal provide an authentic African experience?

To give me a head start, I visited Baaba Maal at his country house, an hour's drive south of Dakar and 10 minutes from the village of Touba Dialaw.

We sat in his shaded yard, nibbling melon slices. An intellectual who studied at the Lycée in Paris, Baaba Maal has been keen to stress the abiding significance of Dakar as the most westerly point in all Africa. 'The geographic position of Senegal makes it want to be like France, like the USA,' he says. 'People in Senegal are interested in everything. We're a democratic nation with a significant future. Senegal is a country of great activity. As you know, people from overseas can come here and have life-changing experiences.'

Taking the musician's advice, photographer Barry Lewis and I travel on south: skirting the 'Petite Côte' resorts immediately below the capital, we drive in our Toyota

Landcruiser along the adequate N1 road towards the border with the Gambia.

We pass compounds of circular huts, made from mud and animal dung. There are also the omnipresent gnarled baobab trees which dominate the flat, cauterised landscape and separate the road from the beaches that border the Atlantic. Often described as 'upside down' trees, baobabs cast extraordinary shapes, their branches looking more like roots. Sometimes more than a thousand years old, the trees have status as repositories of the country's wisdom; in the past, marabouts and juju men would be buried in their trunks.

After two hours we reach the scruffy coastal town of Joal which is perfumed, not unpleasantly, by the scent of herrings being smoked into kippers, the local industry. Then we turn off the road into the bush. So begins a 15-mile journey along farm tracks through baobab forests, rough sand roads, and then a dash across an estuary.

Such adventure before we arrive adds a Xanadu-like quality to the Royal Lodge, isolated and looming before us on the coastline. Its luxuriousness sends us reeling. All 26 'rooms' at this five-star property are stand-alone, faux African huts, a world apart from the genuine ones we have just passed – not many of those compounds have a spa. Each hut has a

circular living area set at an angle from the enormous bedroom with its vast bed. The bathroom seems as big as a stadium, with a giant Jacuzzi in the corner.

But the grounds of the Royal Lodge are what make it really special. There's a luxurious sense of space, so fellow-guests always seem far away. The deep beach, fringed by baobab trees and – appropriately – huge, frondy royal palms, is just steps from the veranda of my hut. The pink sun sets fierily behind the vast Atlantic and, with my feet calmed by the cool, sensual sand, in the soft light I fall into a trance-like state of perfect peace.


A piece of accidental art punctuates this setting. Thirty-three years ago, a freighter washed up on the hotel's beach, breaking in two. Now, like an edgy sculptural installation, the remains squat in the shallow sea. If you tire of the warm waters of the infinity pool, the ocean in

January is ideal for swimming. It is, I notice, far calmer than around Toubab Dialaw.

This is Africa, so a measure of wildlife can be expected: walking along the beach I come across pelicans, flamingos and hornbills. There is also an utter absence of beach hustlers, unusual in a developing country.

As so often in Senegal, where you are never far from a warm baguette, the influence of France shines through in the hotel's cuisine, a Gallic take on local Senegalese ingredients. With the Atlantic just outside, it is unsurprising that seafood is a standard: grilled fish flavoured with lemon, garlic and black pepper; snapper stuffed with spices; but there is also simmered lamb, and *maafe*, seasoned chicken or beef cooked with vegetables.

Before we can become addicted to the Royal Lodge, however, we must head for our next destination, an hour's drive away. The Sine-Saloum Delta, named after the Saloum River and its most



Mango tree in the Saloum Delta National Park, 695 square miles of natural beauty and wildlife

important tributary, is 695 square miles of natural beauty and wildlife. Set apart from the rest of Senegal, the islands of the delta feel frozen in time.

We are spirited across the delta by ferry-boat, a 20-minute ride to the Delta Niominka hotel. The accommodation at this sophisticated riverbank hotel is comprised of circular African huts; despite their thatched roofs, the gabling at the front of the two-storey buildings has more of an Alpine feel.

An Abyssinian roller, a blue and brown bird for which the delta is renowned, cuts across the sky above us, as Barry Lewis and I set off on a walking expedition. We traipse through warm sand until we reach the village of Dionewar.

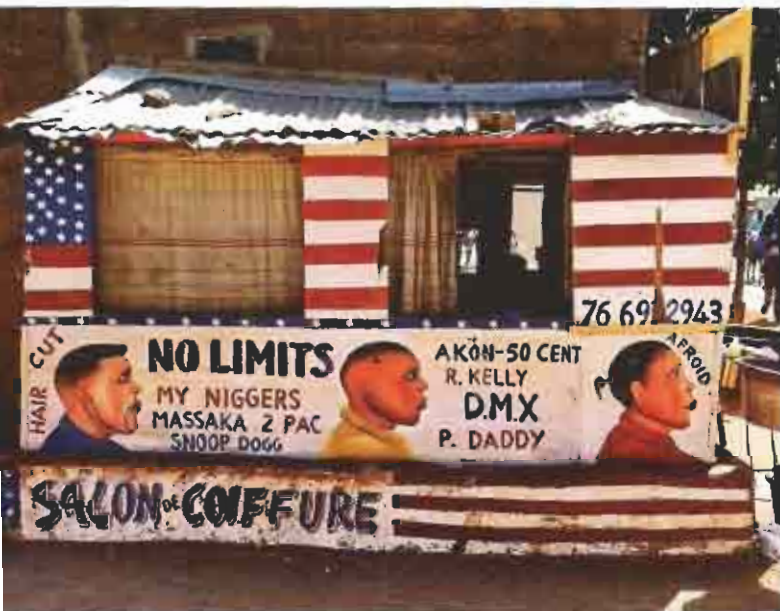
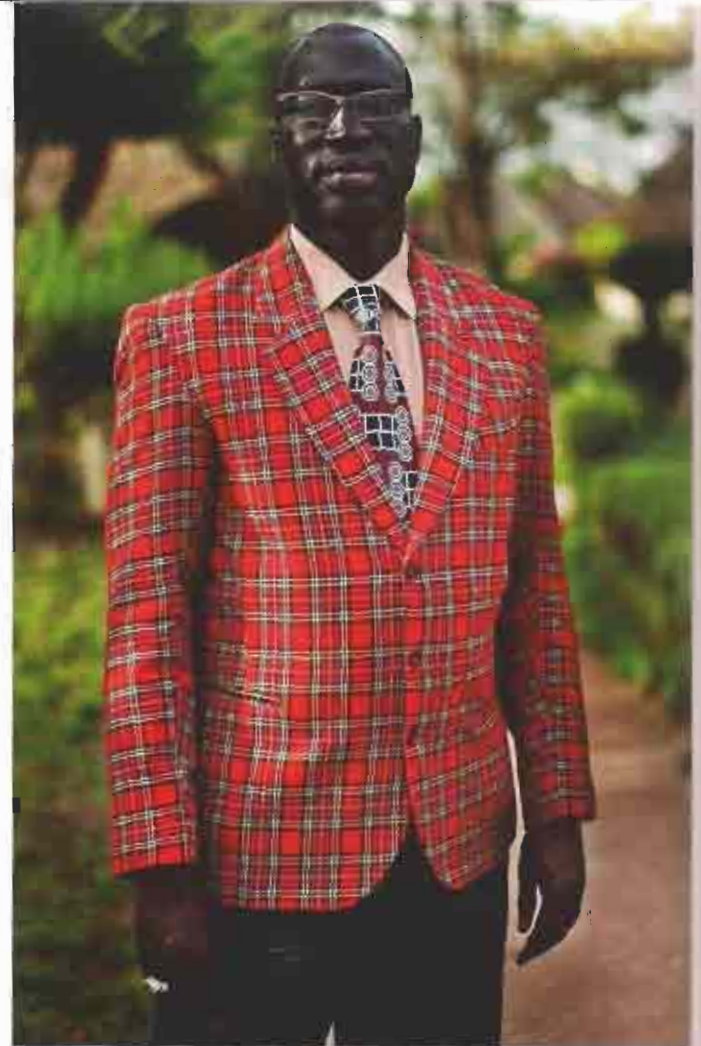
There, the pale blur of the sun boils through a sky hazy with sand dust; its rays dazzle off a white salt-pan, an oversized village square. Then the salt-flat's deserted wastes are interrupted, as across it at a loping pace runs a young boy, propelling a metal

hoop before him with a stick. Suddenly, out of the village's mud huts pour dozens of young women, clad in striking, traditional robes, bearing brooms and pails. They begin to tidy the salt-flat's surface, brushing off stray mini-dunes of sand, twigs and detritus. Sweeping a salt-flat clean? It feels as though we are watching some ancient African myth.

Soon the pair of *toubabs* – as white people are known in Senegal – tucked under a tree come to the young women's attention. The boldest points to a younger girl: 'She is the singer.' This girl is a *griot*, the caste from which most West African singers emerge. She breaks out into ululating trills, as she performs *yela*, a musical form imitating the pounding of grain; this rhythm – ubiquitous in Senegal – is an ancient form of music, a literal expression of life's rhythms.

With their brooms and upturned pails as percussion, other women join in, counterpointing the vocalist's cadences. It's a





Clockwise from top left: children on Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar; Djibril Diop, manager of the Delta Niominka hotel; barber's sign in Saly. **Opposite,** wrestler in the village of Dionewar on the River Saloum

magical moment, even more so for being utterly unexpected. In a further surprise, we find the women dancing with us, to great whoops of laughter and clutching of bellies at our eccentric efforts.

Then an older woman appears, her face thunderous: our new companions must clean the salt-flat. They are ushered away. Sheepishly, the *toubabs* wander back to their hotel.

The next morning we head into the mangroves on a motorised pirogue. At a fishing village a couple of miles away, a score of such vessels are pulled up on the sand-bank; one bears the rubric 'El Hadji-Diouf', the Senegalese footballer who plays in the UK.

Into the sultry mangroves we travel in our boat, following in the wake of a trio of local girls, a photo-opportunity. Deep in the water a battle is taking place. Fish from the Atlantic swim into these calm creeks, to lay eggs in the mangrove roots, to which oysters also cling. But barracuda follow the fish, looking for prey. We might also have been prey, had we encountered any of the three species of crocodile found in the area.

At 6pm, as we head back in our pirogue to the Delta Niominka, the horizon of the flat white river and the clouding white sky pancake into one another, an infinity landscape that shortly explodes with the sunset.

At dawn we bid farewell to the delta.

We head to a traditional market, at Mbaye Faye, deep

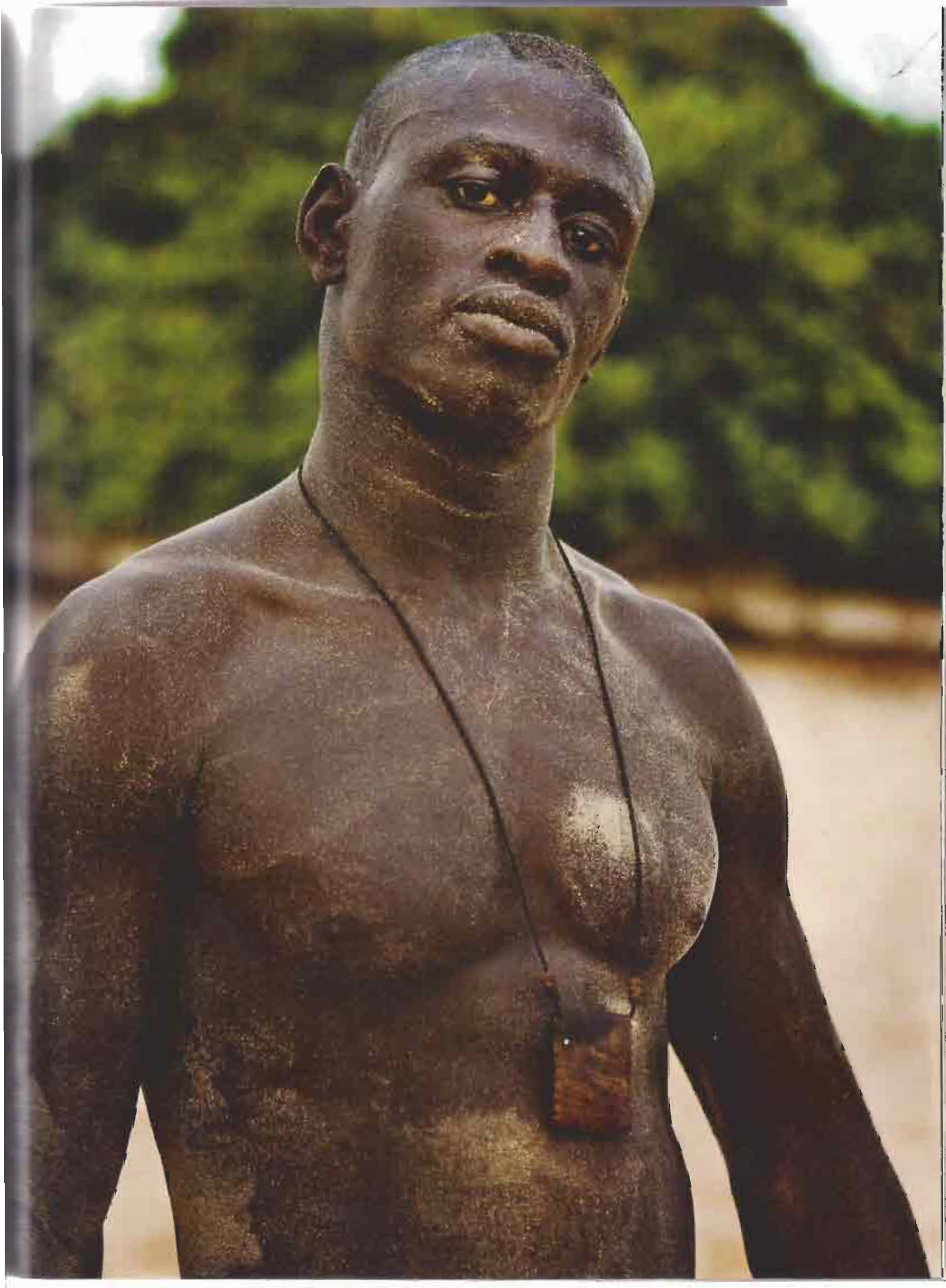
inland. Our drive takes us through miles of savanna. Huge mango trees, the size of ancient English oaks, pepper our path; their lower leaves trimmed by the local Zebu cattle.

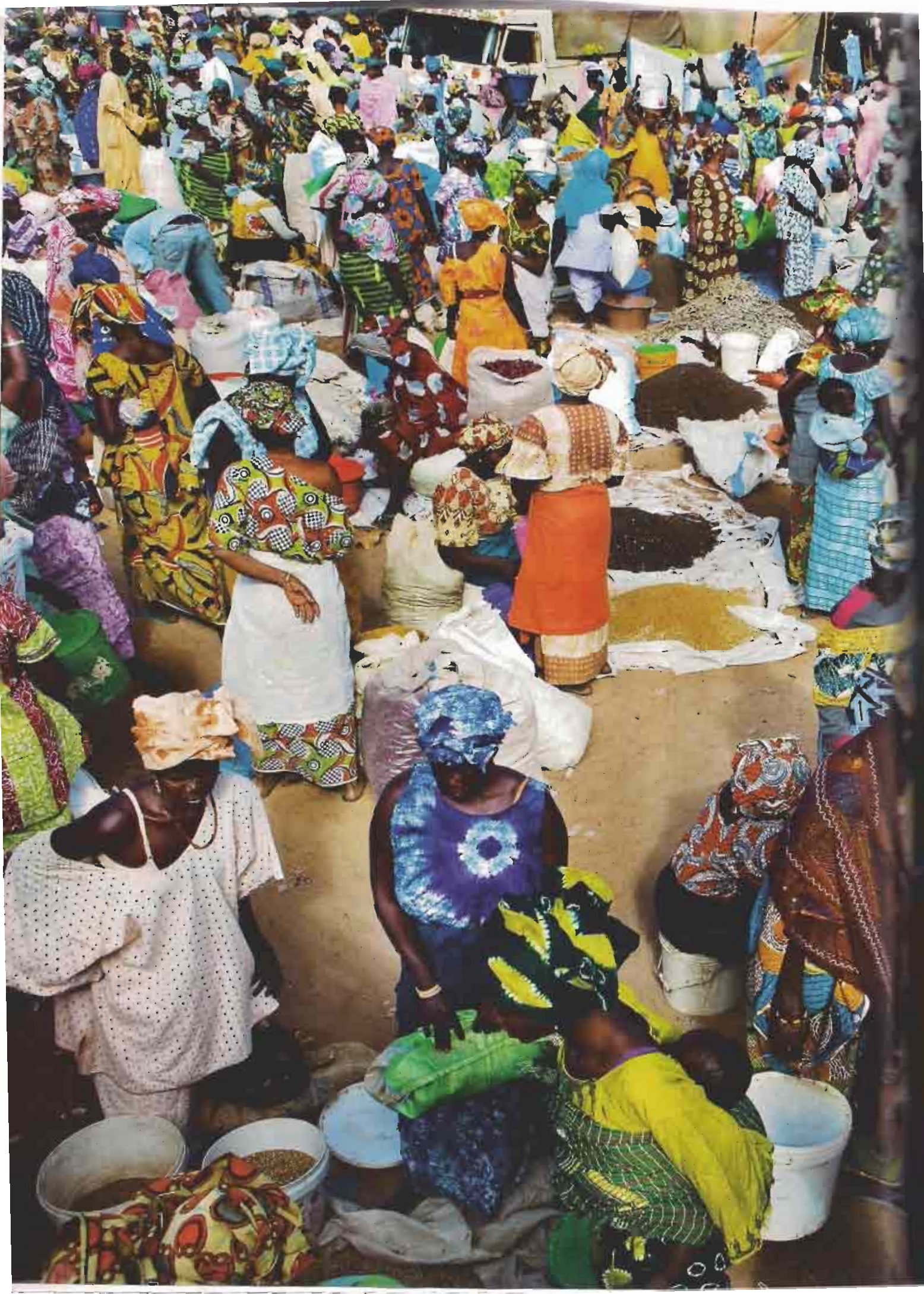
The densely packed, baking hot market is a sea of dark-skinned members of the Serrer tribe, which migrated from northern Africa centuries ago. The women sell *niebe* beans, grown locally, once used to fatten up slaves for sale; there is white sorrel, used in the delicious *thieboudienne*, the highly spiced national dish of marinated fish cooked with vegetables, rice and tomato sauce; red sorrel, for drinks and marmalade; and mounds of brown millet. The selling of livestock, mainly cows and horses, takes place in front of witnesses – all deals sealed with an oral contract.

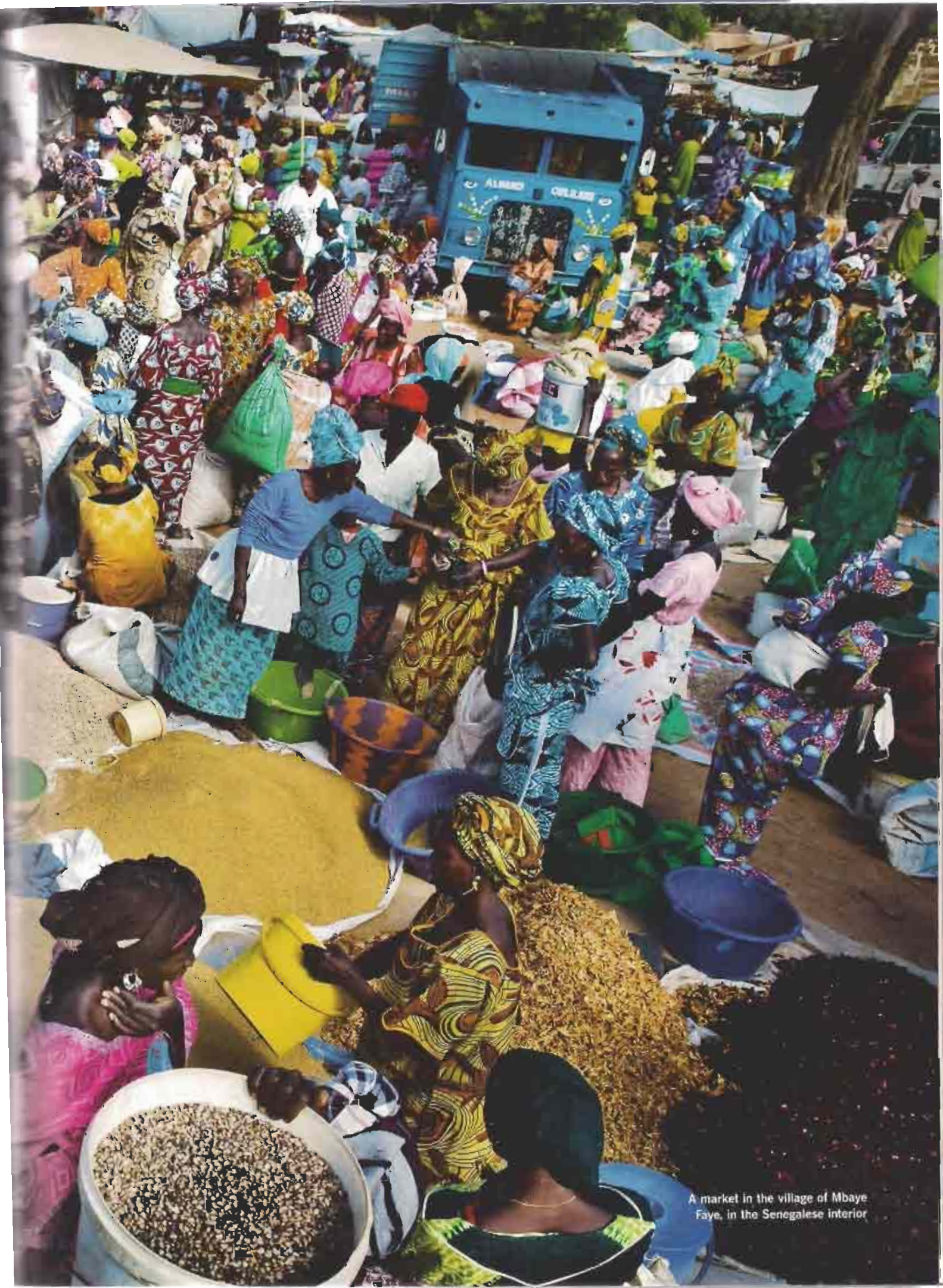
Exhausted from the midday heat at the market, we are grateful to return to the Landcruiser; we drive across country until we reach the N1 highway and arrive at the town of Mbour.

Mbour is the fishing capital of Senegal, a bustling city with the feel of a port. At the end of a sand avenue, we glimpse first the adamantine Atlantic and then the ochre walls and turrets of the nine-room Tama Lodge

The hotel has a South Sea Island feel. Lifesize Dogon statues from the Malian interior decorate the garden and rows of palm trees lead down to one of the finest beaches in Senegal; the trees

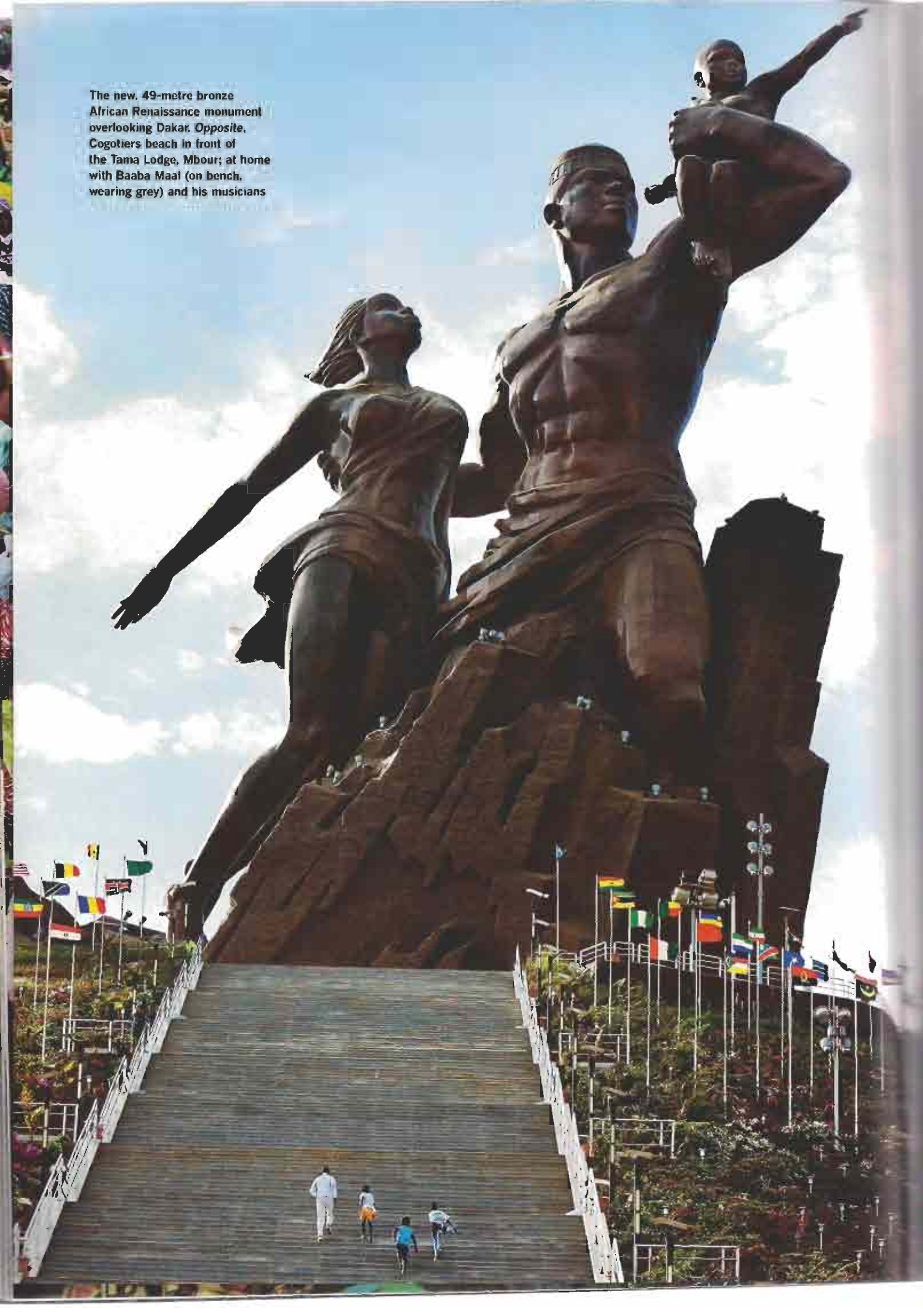






A market in the village of Mbaye Faye, in the Senegalese interior

The new, 49-metre bronze African Renaissance monument overlooking Dakar. Opposite, Cogotiers beach in front of the Tama Lodge, Mbour; at home with Baaba Maal (on bench, wearing grey) and his musicians





Senegal: the lowdown

Independent tour operator **The Senegal Experience** (0845 338 8706, www.senegal.co.uk) features a range of hotels within the Sine-Saloum Delta, Saly and La Somone regions, as well as a choice of three- or seven-night 'Touring' itineraries (including areas north of Dakar and East Senegal), and a 'Rivers of West Africa' cruise. Seven-night trips start from £979 per person (and from £1,175 staying in luxury hotels), based on half board with return flights and transfers. **The Grand Coast Adventure Tour**, taking in Dakar, the Lompoul Desert, Saint Louis, Djoudj Park, the Pink Lake and Kayar, costs from £1,219 per person for three nights (based on two sharing), including full-board accommodation, flights and transfers.

Where to stay
Delta Niominka hotel, Saloum Delta National Park (00 221 33 948 99 35; www.deltaniominka.com), Doubles from €63
Espace Sobo Badé, Touba/Dialaw (00 221 33 836 03 58; www.espacesobobade.com), doubles from about €21.

Royal Lodge, Saloum (00 221 33 957 60 00, www.le-royal-lodge.com) Doubles from €220
Tama Lodge, Mbour (00 221 33 9570040; www.tamalodge.com) Doubles from €106

Getting there
 The Senegal Experience uses scheduled **Brussels Airlines** (www.brusselsairlines.com) flights for its packages. Departures to Dakar, via Brussels, are available from Heathrow, Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Leeds Bradford and East Midlands.
Journey time Flights from London takes 10 hours via Brussels.

Weather to go
 The climate is pleasantly tropical with a year-round average of between 26°C and 30°C. November to May is the sunniest time to go; from June to October sudden but spectacular rainstorms can interrupt the sunshine.

Festivals
 One of Africa's best music festivals, the **St Louis International Jazz Festival** (www.saintlouisjazz.com), is held on 24-28 May in 2012 and can easily be incorporated into a tour.

filter the sun until its soft light lands on the ochre-pigmented clay and grass constructions. With a glass of coconut water, we slurp down piquant sea urchins, fished out of the ocean moments before. 'I like simplicity best,' says the Tama Lodge's creator, the septugenarian Philippe Ancely, one of those Frenchmen who still understands that smoking brings health benefits. 'And I like space and calm. And here you have all three.'

Philippe and his daughter Elisabeth are clearly creative souls: Philippe also owns a neighbouring property which he has filled with African statues and artwork, some ancient. '*Il n'a pas le mauvais juju*,' he smiles. Elisabeth creates gorgeous black leather and stone jewellery, selling it through Donna Karan in New York under the name By Wang.

Genuinely sad to leave, we head back up the road towards Dakar. But we have before us a truly authentic African experience: an impromptu performance at Baaba Maal's house. That evening, at the far end of his yard, beneath an aquamarine awning, Baaba Maal gives us one of those life-changing Senegalese moments. With various musicians, a low-key acoustic concert, lasting three-and-a-half-hours, is performed beneath the bluish light of a clear, star-sparkled sky and a thin shell of a moon.

Could there be anywhere better in the world at this moment, I find myself wondering.

