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Surf's up in Senegal

Nils Elzenga takes to the waves in Dakar, a laid-back coastal capital and the westernmost city on the African mainland

"Big wave coming!" screams Senegalese surfer Abdoulaye. "Paddle!" I react slightly too late and as a massive wall of water rolls towards me, I realise I'm in trouble. Seconds later, the wave crashes into me and pushes me deep underwater for a seeming eternity. My board is ripped out of my hands and then I'm dumped onto the beach like a piece of driftwood. Lying on the sand gasping for air, I understand why Ouakam is such a famous surf break.

Ouakam, named after the neighbourhood in Dakar where it is located, is one of the dozen or so world-class surf spots in the Senegalese capital. Find the city on Google maps and you'll understand why it boasts so many quality waves. Dakar is built on an almost perfectly triangular peninsula in the Atlantic Ocean, meaning its shores receive waves from every possible direction. Any surfer, from first-timer to hardcore pro, can have great fun here, depending on the season.

In summer, I usually go to the endless beach of Yoff, on Dakar's northern coastline. The mellow breaks there deliver waves of about a metre high, blown glassy by light, offshore winds. Winter is when Dakar's more serious spots come to life. They are found on the city's islands and on its south shore, and break over rocks that are often covered in urchins. Most of the time these spots produce head-high waves, but they can also swell up to thunderous barrels the size of trucks.

Away from its spectacular shores, Dakar itself is one of West Africa's liveliest cities. A few days after my rather disastrous encounter with Ouakam, my muscles still stiff from the impact, my new friend Abdoulaye takes me to Koulgraoul. A highlight of Dakar's celebrated nightlife, Koulgraoul is an open-air nightclub in the garden of Océanium, a marine research institute close to the presidential palace in Plateau, Dakar's historical city centre. As we descend the stairs leading to a dance floor overlooking the sea, I sense that I'm underdressed in my jeans and T-shirt. Women are walking around on stiletto heels, glittering dresses whirling around them. Men are wearing shiny shirts, jewellery and suave sunglasses. Senegalese, Abdoulaye tells me, are fashionistas by nature. "Senegal has one of Africa's best fashion industries," the surfer says, before disappearing on the packed dance floor. "Dakar is known as Africa's Paris!"

During daytime, too, Africa's Paris is fascinating. Not far from giant Independence Square, with its crumbling colonial buildings, lie the alleyways of Sandaga market. "Hey, Playboy! Psst! Playboy," the sellers hiss, trying to catch my attention as I walk into the market. Unfortunately for them, I'm too busy dodging the handcarts, taxis and motorcycles that honk their way through throngs of pedestrians. My nose fills with smells. Fresh goat meat, on bloody display in butcher's shops. Herbs used in Senegal's famously spicy cuisine. Cheap, strong perfumes. Motor oil and gasoline from repair shops where boys covered in smudge fiddle with broken machines.

When I randomly turn a corner – I've quickly lost my sense of direction – I find myself surrounded by strange animal products: monkey skulls, dried lizard claws, bundles of dusty bird feathers. These, explains Abdoulaye, are grigris, voodoo amulets that hold strong powers. "They protect from disease and death," he says. "They help couples have babies. But they are also used to destroy enemies." An old man approaches, trying to sell us a small leather bag containing teeth. I decline politely.

Abdoulaye, overwhelmed, leads me away from the market to Ali Baba's, one of Dakar's best-known restaurants. There, we dig into plates of thiebou dienne, Senegal's most popular dish. Deservedly so: the spicy rice topped with vegetables and tuna meat is delicious.

"Perfect food for surfers," says Abdoulaye between mouthfuls. I nod, pondering the question why more surfers haven't discovered this exotic surf city yet. Because the truth is that, although the popularity of surfing is soaring worldwide, Dakar's accessible waves remain mostly empty. In fact, I surf alone here quite often,



Above, a surfing class in progress on Yoff Beach in Dakar. Below, one of the dozens of surf spots dotting the coast of the Senegalese capital. Photographs by Nils Elzenga for The National



Dakar is built on a triangular peninsula in the Atlantic Ocean, meaning its shores receive waves from every possible direction

a dream come true for a European used to sharing waves with wolf packs of aggressive competitors.

"I think a lot of potential tourists are scared off by the prospects of surfing in unknown West Africa," explains Jesper Mouritzen, a 33-year-old Danish expat who runs a surf camp (www.gosurf.dk) on the island of Ngor, home to the renowned breaks Ngor Right and Left. "Most people don't know anything about this part of the world." Apparently, not too much has changed since *The Endless Summer*, the classic 1966 movie about two American surf travellers who first showed Dakar's waves to the outside world. "In the plane heading for Africa they wondered what was in store for them," says the voice-over in the movie. "Would they find surf? Would they catch malaria? Would they be speared by a native? They didn't have any idea."

Not many Senegalese surf themselves either, to be fair. "Most people in Dakar do not know how to swim," says Mouritzen. "This includes some of my own employees here, even though they take daily boats between the mainland and the island."

Senegalese in general have a deep-rooted fear of water, agrees local surf legend Patina Ndiaye, who says he does not suffer from this fear because he belongs to the Lebou ethnic group. "We Lebou are fishermen who have lived in Dakar's coastal neighbourhoods for centuries," says Ndiaye. The Lebou have always kept themselves somewhat apart from the rest of Senegalese society. They have developed their own unique branch of Sufism. Called the Layenne, the brotherhood is headquartered in the Yoff neighbourhood.

But even among the Lebou, Ndiaye was for years the only practitioner of the sport. "The first surfers I ever saw here were a family from the Netherlands, or Sweden, I don't remember. I was still a boy. People told me that the foreigners were lying in the water on flat little boats without sails. I couldn't believe it, so I went to see for myself." After watching fascinated for some days, Ndiaye asked the strangers if he could try one of their boards. He could, and remembers being immediately hooked.

After the family left, however, Ndiaye found himself without a



Source: Graphic News, Google

The flight Return flights on Emirates (www.emirates.com) from Dubai to Dakar cost from Dh6,775, including taxes

The hotel Hotel Ngor Diarama (www.hotels-ngordiararama.com) is a five-minute drive from the airport and has a pool and a private beach. Double rooms cost from 55,600 francs (Dh427) per night, including taxes

tour operator. A couple of years back, she decided to come to Dakar to set up her own surf camp in Yoff (www.malikasurfcamp.com), still the only decent one in town apart from Jesper Mouritzen's.

Sitting in the shade of the wooden beach shack where Marta stores her boards, she recalls how she met her Senegalese husband, Aziz Kane. "He was the only local in the whole area who actually went into the ocean," she says, rocking their seven-month-old daughter, Khady. "So one day I just went up to him and we went surfing together." That first shared session turned out to be everything but romantic, however.

"As soon as we entered the water, a police van surveying the beach drove up to us. An officer ordered us out of the water. By the time we reached him, a huge crowd had gathered on the beach to see what was happening." The police officer wanted to take the couple to the police station. That proved impossible, however, since his van had run out of fuel.

"We waited for hours until somebody finally arrived with a jerrycan. At the police station the commander immediately freed us, saying how nice that strange sport we were practising must be."

While Marta talks, Aziz is on the beach, giving a surf lesson to three students staying in their surf camp. He lays his board in the sand to demonstrate the series of swift movements necessary to properly catch a wave. Paddle with your arms to gain speed. Grab the board. Stretch out your arms. Swing your legs underneath the body. Stand up. And then, of course, the most difficult bit: keep your balance. The students struggle to imitate Aziz before entering the blue water together – the only four surfers today in the whole of Yoff.

Nonetheless, the beach itself is jam-packed with people. Some are bathing but most are exercising. In large groups, they jog through the sand, occasionally stopping for push-ups or crunches. Some boys are practising lutte, traditional wrestling, which is even more popular than football in Senegal. It is a spectacle that can be seen here every day, as on Dakar's many other beaches. Dakarais, as the city's inhabitants are called, are renowned for being sports-minded. All the more strange, then, that they don't include surfing in their daily sports diet.