

I have been traveling to West Africa for 11 years now. This is the first year where I've decided to focus on one country. I remain hopeful that we will establish cocoa study centers in Ekona, Cameroon and Ebekawopa, Ghana. But the barrier is great: finding scholarships to pay for students to come, finding students who care about Africa, finding university faculty and administrators who see that providing a village experience is critical to the personal and professional development of university graduates and undergraduates.. A ten day trip costs \$4500; those students who are sensitive to international development and social justice issues tend to be the ones without the money.

This year, because of a \$10,000 donation made to me last October, I decided to focus my efforts on one project: to build a rice hulling and chocolate center in Côte d'Ivoire, the country that grows 43% of the world's cocoa beans while using child slaves or worst forms of child labor.

Rice is a common female task in cocoa farming villages. Cocoa is mostly the purview of males. So, a center that focuses on both would be very balanced.

Women hull rice in one of two ways: by paying someone to take them to the nearest rice hulling operation, in which case they pay for transport as well as 25 CFA per Kg. Or, they hull rice the traditional way, by pounding it in a mortar and then winnowing it. A center would cut the cost of processing rice.

The fabrication of chocolate in a village is a completely new idea. Cocoa beans are usually sold to middlemen, who pay bottom dollar for the product so that Europeans and Americans can have their 8 oz bars while watching Arnold Schwarzenegger terminate bad guys. What if villages began to develop pride in their products and actually sold chocolate in cities? Instead of money pouring into the cities from villages, the flow reverses and money remains in the village. Gradually, villages would have sufficient funds to build streets and sidewalks, making village life much more desirable and stemming the flow of children to the cities.

It was to build such a center that I began sending money to my assistant Albert last October. In March, I found out that Albert along with the general contractor had absconded with at least the electric motor for the rice huller. This motor is quite large and costs \$1500. I communicated with Evariste, my former assistant to find a way to finish the center. We sent funds to Mathurin, Evariste's uncle to go to the village (Depa) and make a report to me. Subsequently, in June, we sent funds to get the job done to a point that when I arrived in early September, I would be able to set up a chocolate kitchen and take pictures and video of the rice huller.

My wife, Eve, and I left our home in San Luis Obispo and flew to New York City, where we spent some wonderful time visiting friends, relatives and museums. I contacted Evariste and he brought his family to the Central Park Zoo. We had a bit of a difficulty connecting because the taxi driver, who was African, had no idea where the zoo was. I said to Evariste, "How can a taxi driver not know such a thing?" To which Evariste replied, "Africans don't visit zoos."



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We flew to Iceland where we spent one night. We had just enough time to take a bus to Reykjavik and to eat in a restaurant that specializes in Icelandic foods. I regaled myself on dried, cottony cod and stinky fermented shark, all washed down with an Icelandic aquavit.

We arrived in Paris on September 5. I dropped Eve off at the TGV at Montparnasse and she traveled south to visit friends in Vendee. That evening, I took Royal Air Maroc to Casablanca and then another flight to Abidjan. I arrived at 4 AM on Friday, September 6 at 5 AM. I checked into the Ibis Hotel, showered and ate breakfast. The dining room was chockablock with hommes d'affaires, some African, some European. I'm sure a lot of deals involving cheap Ivoirian cocoa made with cheap child labor happen in that room.

Mathurin our driver, Kone, picked me up at the hotel and we started by changing \$2,000 in \$100 bills into FCFA (Franc Communauté Financière Africaine). I asked him whether we'd do it on the black market but he said, "No, that's not serious". Two very common Ivoirisms are: "Il faut faire un effort" (make an effort—usually about giving someone money) and "Il faut être sérieux" (you have to be serious) which means different things in different contexts, but generally it means to be conservative and not take chances.

We ended up changing money in a bank/fortress that had layers and layers of security. First, Kone had to park the car in a specially guarded parking lot. Then we had to give up our identity cards (in my case, passport) and we had to proceed through a maze of giant, clanging doors with a security guard at each door. We finally reached the inner sanctum. The lady at the counter looked at each and every \$100 bill for date and state. I knew from a previous experience that you don't bring just any bills to Africa. They have to be recently minted and in good condition.

Anyway, my stack of bills was ¼ inch thick. She handed back a 3-inch stack in four denominations: 5,000 CFA notes (\$10 each), 2,000 CFA notes (\$4 each), 1,000 CFA notes (\$2 each), and 500 CFA notes (\$1 each). All in mint condition.

After collecting our loot, our ID cards, and our car .... Oh, by the way, about the car. It was just typical of all the rented cars I've used in West Africa: four tires that were neither balanced nor aligned, an AC system that didn't function, a speedometer that only occasionally registered the speed, and a clutch that slipped whenever we were in first gear.

Once we got the money changed, we went to a shopping center to purchase some tools. I had brought a \$700 chocolate machine in my bright yellow suitcase. This is a machine with pieces of granite and it weighs over 40 lbs. Fortunately the upper limit for baggage is 50 lbs. Besides the chocolate machine, I needed to purchase a microwave oven because no chocolate kitchen can be without one. And with it we bought glass bowls, stirring spoons, and voltage protectors as Ivoirian electricity kills small motors.

By noon, we were on the road to Yamoussoukro. In the past, we had taken the road to Gagnoa, a big city, but it is in very bad shape. A note about sub-Saharan Africa... the rule is bad roads. It's the number one problem. Also, people drive like maniacs (making Italian drivers look like German old ladies).



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For the first hour, the road was good. Kone took advantage by driving our non-aligned, non-balanced tires at 90 MPH. I'm of course cowering in the back seat sans seat belt. Of course, I have images of flying through the windshield. But I've learned to face danger with calm. The best phrase on such occasions is Inch Allah (God Willing). And Kone being a Muslim, it's appropriate.

As we proceeded north, the road surface turned far too uneven to continue our Mazerati pace. Also, there were



now so many trucks and the road had shrunk to two lanes. In the picture at the right, here's something I haven't seen before: putting sheep on top of a bus, untethered, and expecting their will to live to triumph over any momentary lapse of attention. Left, below, is the state of the road from Yamoussoukro.

We finally reach Yamoussoukro, the expansive capital that Houphouet-Boigny spent \$5 billion of a World Bank loan on: giant cathedral (gorgeous—see last year's blog), palace complete with crocodile infested moat (where HB would throw certain opponents), very wide streets lined with 100 foot tall streetlights, airport, etc.

We turn south toward Sinfra, then to Daloa, and finally to Issia, where we check into the hotel. On the way, we stop to pee in the bush. By the way, peeing in public is no big deal; it's done in the city and the country. My daughter, (name withheld for privacy), was mortified when I once pulled over near San Juan Bautista and peed under a tree; her best friend was in the car. Don't know if she was mortified.



Issia was established at the foot of this granitic upwelling that has been seen as a powerful place by multiple religions. There is a Catholic retreat there along with an auto parts shop consisting of auto bodies lying helter skelter and strong men hammering pieces of metal into ploughshares. I've stayed at this hotel many times before. In the background, you see the caillou (pebble—a euphemism) a.

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The next morning, Saturday, we drove to Daloa—an hour north. There we entered two Lebanese businesses. Incidentally, most of the home appliance business in Côte d'Ivoire is Lebanese-owned. There are over 40,000 Lebanese living in Côte d'Ivoire, many in the cocoa business but many also in other retail businesses.

I was looking for a strong cooler, as chocolate needs to be quickly cooled to make it shrink away from the mold. At first, I was hoping to purchase a freezer, but I quickly learned that none of the freezers had strong fans. Instead, I chose to focus on beverage coolers, as they are designed with strong fans and can be taken down to 33 degrees, producing ice-cold sucreries (sugary beverages) that taste so very good in the tropics (although this diabetic avoids them).

We plugged two different freezers in to test them. One was small, \$400, but would easily hold the five molds I had brought with me in my luggage. The second was larger and cost \$900. We selected the cheaper freezer because it was smaller, cheaper, and would get the job done. I would have preferred to purchase the bigger one simply because the family was so very nice, in contrast to the owners of the store across the street.

Because even the smaller freezer was too big to fit in our car, we hired a navette, which is the primary method of transport to put it on the roof. Essentially, we rented the roof so nobody would put a goat up there or chickens or plantains that might damage our property.

We drove back to Issia and had lunch in a very run-down place. But the food was excellent! The three of us had carp in eggplant sauce with local rice. By the way, eggplants here are at most 1 inch in diameter. They are cooked until they disintegrate into a puree, which also is flavored with onions and chilis to make a sauce.

After lunch, we went shopping for other tools: a pail for carrying warm water for washing the molds, a basin for soaking the molds, cast-aluminum ladles for pouring chocolate onto the molds, kitchen towels for wiping the molds dry. We shopped in a maze of small shops, the roofs of which overlapped so that you were never outside and it was pitch black except where they had put blue lights. Very eerie. The maze went on forever. Maybe shopping centers are designed that way to prevent thieves, as there is no way to get away quickly. We put our purchases in the car and crossed the street to await the arrival of the reefer while standing under a tree for shade.

The van pulled up, we off-loaded the refrigerator and then stuffed it into a taxi. Depa is only 4 km East of Issia, so when the taxi reached the police blockade (there is one on all the major arteries leaving or entering any town), the taxi driver had to pay two fines: one for leaving the city un-licensed and another for carrying something in the taxi without completely closing the back door.



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Above, left: we are awaiting the arrival of the van.  
Above right: we take the fridge off the roof. Left, we insert the fridge into the taxi.



Before we could put the chocolate room together and check on the state of the rice huller, we had to go visit the chief. You never enter a village without first greeting the chief, and this usually involves libations--palm wine, coutoucou (palm brandy), gin, brandy, or sucrierie (sugary stuff such as Coke). The chief wasn't there, but we spent time with some of the women who were ecstatic about the rice hulling machine. So we spent a little while with a very happy group of people (below, left)

We then drove back to the new center and walked around to inspect the outside of the building, the inside, the rice huller, and the chocolate kitchen. It's a handsome building (below, right), even if it's missing windows and will have to be retrofitted with ventilation as the dehuller gives off phenomenal heat. Fortunately, the chocolate room has a large window, allowing cool air to enter.



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Left: the rice huller with its new motor.



Lots of people came to share with us the joy of having built such a structure. And of course, they were fascinated with the idea of making chocolate and dying to taste some.



We set up and connected the equipment in the kitchen. On the left is the refrigerator, in the middle is the chocolate melangeur, and to the right is the microwave oven. The refrigerator is used to chill the molds to crystallize the chocolate and make the disks easy to remove. The melangeur takes 32 hours to make a batch: 1 Kg of fat (preferably cocoa butter), 1 Kg sugar, and 2 Kg cocoa beans. The chocolate is currently made with margarine that I melted and poured off the fat--as water thickens chocolate and binds the machine). I told them that eventually, they will need to find a source of cocoa butter.

Right: grinding the sugar and the margarine.





Then David, who is in charge of the project, and I started to roast the cocoa beans. Above: we went to the nearest kitchen (they are always separate from the living quarters).



David (left) spent 45 minutes stirring the beans. I sat on the bench next to him and pulled out blazing handfuls, pinching off the shells and dropping the dried, roasted beans into a winnowing basket.

We had maybe a dozen people helping us, including some very enthusiastic children (uh-oh--child labor!) The children's fingers were so much more nimble than ours and they made a game of it. We probably processed close to 1,000 beans.

David poured them into a clean, dry mortar and pounded them for about 30 minutes, reducing them to a powder. He sieved off a bunch which I then added to the chocolate melangeur. He poured the rest into a bowl and I slowly added the crushed beans to the melangeur, which was very happily spinning away. I gave out samples, and everyone was so amazed and happy. We let the machine turn all night and went back to the hotel.

This was to be the ceremony day. But, as with all things West African, time marches slowly. I couldn't rush off to the village to check the chocolate machine because it would have been impolitic for me to enter the village without seeing the chief, but fortunately Jules Beka, the chief's spokesman, was adding chocolate powder for me. By noon, the chief had assembled over 75 people, including representatives of 5 villages and their chiefs. We had a ceremony where we exchanged histories--what had happened since we last seen each other--and I was dressed in chiefly garb.

After the ceremony, we quickly adjourned to the rice hulling and chocolate making center, where dozens of people stood around and watched while the rice huller spat out its hulls into the mouths of waiting chickens and ants. (see right)

I stood in the chocolate kitchen giving out spoonfuls of chocolate to standing room only audience (as well as people clustered outside the window). One of the chocolate committee members stood next to me, wrapping chocolate.



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Above, left: the rice huller spits out the hulls to waiting chickens.

Above, right: two experts make adjustments. Left, middle: at first the machine breaks the rice grains into bits. Below, right: the machine gets all gummed up. Below, left: finally the machine is functioning as it should.



Zereguhe



Pezoan



L'humidimètre



Tetia

This was the day of my departure, so we had arranged to visit three villages. We started by sitting with the chief of Depa and exchanging news and drinking beverages. David sat there dividing up the disks into piles to take with us to the different villages.

It was threatening to rain, so we piled into the car and drove 1 km to Tetia. By this time, it was pouring, and the car couldn't negotiate the uphill climb on slippery mud, so we climbed out and ran through the pouring rain to the chief's meeting house. We met with village officials, briefly exchanged news, and presented chocolate to our very appreciative hosts. We wanted to know whether they thought the chocolate was smooth enough and if it had enough sugar. They thought it was smooth enough, but not sweet enough.

We then drove to Pezoan, which is where we had built a public toilet, donated a scale and a dryness meter. The chief had just lost his wife, so he was unable to meet with us. However, I recognized old friends and we enjoyed each other's company. We then told them that Pezoan is the site of the next rice hulling and chocolate making center and everyone shouted with joy. We drove to the site, which is right next to an electrical pole.

Next, we drove to Zereguhe, which is located between Depa and Tetia. Like Pezoan, we have built a public toilet here, donated a scale and a dryness meter. Since they do not have electricity, we will not be able to build a rice hulling and chocolate making center there. But they gave us a chicken anyway, which we tied up and put in the trunk.

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We left the Issia area at noon and drove NE to Yamoussoukro, where we stopped and had lunch on the outskirts of town. Street food is “fast” food in Côte d’Ivoire. Stopping in a restaurant usually means a minimum of 2 hours. Kone bought us three sheep liver sandwiches in tomato sauce with hard-boiled egg and onions and fresh tomatoes. Excellent!

We drove another 4 hours south. On the way, we saw three accidents. The first was a beer truck that had turned over and crashed thousands of full beer bottles onto the road. Both lanes were covered in glass, so we had to drive in the grass (no pun intended). We then came across a semi that had overturned, spilling thousands of bags of sugar which children were busily carrying away. Finally, about half an hour before arriving in Abidjan, we came upon a bus that had crashed into the median strip. There were hundreds of rubber-neckers milling about and I chose not to walk back because I don’t want to see blood and guts. There were many bodies lying about in the grass. Mathurin said he doubted whether anyone had died, but I just hate that kind of thing. I’ve already been involved in two accidents in Africa in the past and I’ve already seen enough dead bodies.

We drove another 5 minutes, and suddenly there was a loud pounding. I immediately said, “back tire!”. Kone and Mathurin got out and concluded the noise was the chicken pounding away in the trunk. We drove another 5 minutes and the loud pounding started again. I immediately repeated, “back tire!” and Kone peered under the car and noticed that the tread was peeling away from the tire’s inside surface. Kone took everything out of the trunk. I held the chicken, who flapped his wings so I turned him upside down, which generally has a calming influence on chickens. The spare turned out to be a little sketchy, but Kone had it on in no time and we thankfully drove at only 100 KPH into Abidjan.

They dropped me off at the Golden Hotel where I rented a room for 3.5 hours. I enjoyed a fabulous dinner of Capitaine Grille à l’Abidjanaise. Capitaine, or grouper, is a fabulous fish, better actually than any halibut, and the Abidjanaise method of preparation is about the best way I know of to prepare grilled fish.

Kone drove us to the airport at 11 PM. I met Mathurin’s three sons. The plane left Abidjan at 2 AM, arrived in Casablanca at 7 AM and I took a second plane for Paris that left at noon. The flight was eventless, and I arrived in Paris at 5 PM. Great to be in Paris again. But I miss Côte d’Ivoire already; despite the dirt and the danger, I love the people and the ways they treat each other.

