

Africa Journal:

En route to La République du Bénin, West Africa, January 9

Harmattan:

Leaving Europe from Paris, you fly over Majorca and the Mediterranean, and then it begins. You look down—you who used to be scared shitless of flying, let alone looking out a plane window at anything. You can't help it because, yes, you have just entered the airspace of another continent and if this can be said, not any old continent but our mother one.

Squares. Rectangles. Semi-arable land, grey-greenish, giving way to a lake: "What lake is that?" you ask the oily-haired British fellow sitting next to you. He looks up from his *Better Homes & Gardens*, "Lake Chad."

The grey and dusty geometry gives way to sculptured sand and, through far off clouds, the even more distant peaks of the Atlas Mountains.

A strong smell of filthy socks permeates the front end of the cabin where you are sitting, so to get a breath of neutral air you walk back towards the loo; there a tiny French woman stands. In my face, she proceeds to denounce the fetid air in loud, rapid fire française. Several times the stewards run up the aisles with a cathouse perfumed somethingorother that is supposed to soak up the noxious smell. It doesn't.

You doze off on bad airline food (this is Air France?) and good wine. When you wake and look out the window again, the vista is dust, dust, dust, presumably sand, through which peers a lowering, dark sun. Is this the Sahara stirring up a sandstorm? The sands which go so far that they leave bits at the bottom of the Caribbean Sea?

Then the beginnings of the River Niger and the dissipation of dust; Gao, according to the screen map, is to the west and, by now, slightly north as the land darkens into grey again and a pewter Niger slithers southward. If the river looks like this from this height, it must be a monstrous force on the ground and, like one of Africa's pythons, pure intention.

The plane crosses the Niger as the sun sets, and a dark cloud churns in from the west, multiplying the vivid orange streaks of light. Above the sky is deepening blue, with just the barest sliver of a new moon.

We begin our descent.

January 26

Three days ago, I looked up and saw a full moon and a few stars; and, exclaiming upon it, I was given a less dystopic explanation—as far as the cities are concerned, an *added* reason—for the absence of blue in Benin's overhead: what I saw flying in was the Harmattan. The huge dust storms that characterize this phenomenon are clouding West

African skies. Nonetheless, in Cotonou and the coastal cities here, you have butane bleu, especially, as I mentioned in an email to E.D., if you look ahead, rather than up. The coup de gras is that, when the wind dies down at night, you have the odd experience of a hotter night than the day; and everyone says that when the Harmattan stops in February, we will cook—no breeze during the day, no wind over the Niger, just inert air and rising temperatures.

Bumper sticker, in English this time: "No Hurry. This is Africa;" and as I wait for this person or that to meet/call/come through/transmogrify at a particular time and they don't I am having to learn the art of watching a mouse hole. Robert—Ro-bear—a Rwandan friend who is, for an African male in these parts, hugely rotund—Robert looks at me with his round face and gentle smile, moves his palms up and down on the air and says, "doucement, doucement—patience." He wears cotton pants and a long shirt, a la Beninois, with a background pattern of yellow bubbles over paler yellow and large black WWII airplanes flying over that. One looks like it is taking a nosedive into his tummy.