

Marie Goldman

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My fascinating return to the African country where I lived 26 years ago

PARLIAMENT has now returned from Conference Recess – a break of a few weeks while the major parties hold their annual conferences. It's also a time for MPs to do some of the things they struggle to find time for throughout the rest of the year. For me, that was a mix of catching up on some constituency casework, meeting with various Chelmsford-based organisations, and then doing something for the very first time: joining a parliamentary delegation to another country.

Twenty-six years ago, when I was in my very early twenties, I spent nearly a year living in Senegal. Now, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you didn't have a clue where that is. I don't mind admitting that neither did I until the opportunity came up to spend a year there as part of my degree, for which I had to spend a year in a French-speaking country.

Senegal is a country on the west coast of Africa. It completely surrounds The Gambia, which sticks into Senegal like a finger and has become much more of a tourist destination for more adventurous English-speaking travellers over recent years.

Its capital, Dakar, noses out into the Atlantic, pointing directly at Cape Verde, just a relatively short 545 miles away across the ocean. And about 938 miles to the north of Dakar are the Canary Islands. At just over 1,000 miles from the equator (Chelmsford is about 3,200 miles from the equator), it has year-round sunshine and very little difference in the number of daylight hours throughout the year. The year-round average temperature is about 25 degrees, but it can fall as low as 16 degrees and reach over 40 degrees.

When I was there in 1998-99, I was supposed to be studying at the University of Dakar (Cheikh Anta Diop), but the lecturers were all on strike, so I gave up and ended up doing work experience at Radio Télévision Sénégalaise (RTS), the national radio and television network – Senegal's state broadcaster – where I translated the news from French into English and broadcast it over the airwaves three times a week. I also followed around



Marie Goldman MP on arrival in Dakar, meeting with the UK Ambassador and the chair of UK Senegal Friendship Group
PHOTOS: MARIE GOLDMAN MP



A rural women's health clinic in Senegal



Marie Goldman MP meets a Chevening Scholar

the journalists and did my very best to encourage their regular news broadcasts to start on time! In addition, I taught English at a local international school and held English language speaking classes at a Dakar business school.

In short, I made lots of friends, learnt a lot about the Senegalese culture and developed a great affinity for a country that is welcoming, outward looking and one of the safest countries in the region. But when I left there, over a quarter of a century ago, I never thought I'd have the opportunity to return. So I was genuinely excited to join a delegation from the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (BGIPU) on a visit to Senegal in the final week of recess last week.

The first thing I should say about parliamentary delegations is that they are key to supporting relationships between the United Kingdom and other countries around the

world. There is simply no substitute for making friends with people by shaking their hand, talking face-to-face, sharing a meal, exchanging ideas in conversation and showing a commitment to a lasting relationship just by being there. And that's important because it helps to keep us safe. The more we work with other countries, the more we trade with them, the more we help each other out and grow genuine friendships, the less likely we are to be facing each other across battlefields.

Returning to Senegal after such a long time was fascinating. As our plane touched down at the newly-built Blaise Diagne airport on the outskirts of Dakar (think Gatwick to London), I was hit with a wave of emotion. I never could have imagined returning so many years later as a member of the UK Parliament, and I was simultaneously nervous, apprehensive and excited about what I might see.

When I was last there, Senegal was about to transition to a new President, after some 19 years of the same one, Abdou Diouf, being in power. There were huge levels of deprivation and poverty. Infrastructure was

terrible – even in the capital, power cuts and water shortages were an almost daily occurrence. And if you think the potholes in Chelmsford are bad, you should have seen the craters that could almost swallow a car whole right in the centre of the city – and that's where there was concrete or tarmac. Many of the roads were just sand and mud – lethal and often impassable when it rained, especially outside the city.

I was so pleased to see that enormous progress had been made since I was last there. The roads around Dakar, especially the new motorway heading inland to the religious city of Touba, which we visited, wouldn't seem amiss in France, especially with the imported French road sign system, a relic of Senegal's French colonial past.

And while electricity hasn't made it out to 100 per cent of the rural areas, the new government, elected in 2024, has a plan to change that within a relatively short number of years, along with other important changes, including more renewable energy generation.

Ministers and MPs from the Senegalese government were keen to

remind us about the relative stability of their country – an outlier within a region, known as the Sahel, which is beset with violence and warring factions.

In fact, Senegal is rightly proud that it has never suffered a coup, something which is rightly attributable to a democratic electoral system, a strong judicial system (that recently prevented the outgoing President from cancelling elections), as well as a military that prides itself on being trusted and respected by the general population.

Our timetable during our stay was jam-packed with meetings, cultural exchanges, and visits. Among the highlights was a visit to the Institut Pasteur de Dakar (the Pasteur Institute), which is a medical research centre in the heart of Dakar. The world-class scientists stationed there are doing vital work on diseases from across the globe, but in particular those that affect the African continent, and could potentially spread further afield.

Their vault of samples allows them to look back in time to discover the origins of diseases. It's through this that they have been able to prove that HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) has been around since the 1920s.

Another highlight was a visit to the Island of Gorée, a 15-minute boat ride from Dakar port, which was once an important staging post for the African slave trade.

But it's a country that has its fair share of problems, too. Climate change and desertification take their toll on the ability for the country to grow crops. They have an incredibly young population, with 70 per cent of Senegalese being under the age of 35. And a recently-discovered debt issue, which caused the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to pause some of the funding it had agreed to, despite the issues being caused by the previous government. There's a lot to work through.

But I returned from Senegal last weekend with a newly-rekindled love for this largely unknown country – at least by many British people. Unless, of course, you're a big football fan, with Senegal boasting one of the best football teams in Africa. And for music fans, you may remember Senegalese star Youssou N'dour's 1994 hit with Neneh Cherry, 'Seven Seconds'.

I hope I'll get to go back again one day.

Marie

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