



The Trip I'll Never Forget

by Ben Henderson

I recently took a trip to the West African country of Nigeria along with two traveling companions to explore economic opportunities in support of Motivation and Learning through Aviation (MALTA). I flew with United Airlines from San Francisco, to Frankfurt, Germany with a connecting Lufthansa flight to Lagos, Nigeria. The airtime for this trip was approximately eighteen hours between both legs from San Francisco to Lagos.

The first segment of our United Airlines flight was on a Boeing 747-400, which is my favorite airplane. It has four powerful Pratt and Whitney Turbo Jet Fan Engines on the United Airlines version of this aircraft. We flew coach from San Francisco to Frankfurt and found our seating in the cabin on this airplane very comfortable for long trips such as our 10-hour flight. As we arrived at the airport terminal, I was very happy to see a B-747 sitting on the departure gate for our flight. When we started the boarding process for the first leg of our trip, I was very pleased to be flying on a four-engine airplane, especially on over-water flights. After our stopover in Germany, my two traveling companions and I boarded a flight for Lagos on a Lufthansa Airbus 340 airplane. The Airbus 340 is a large airplane with four CFM-56 Turbo Jet Engines. The Airbus was built in France.

I had a previous opportunity to fly on an Airbus 340 from Sydney Australia to Hong Kong two years ago and I enjoyed the flight very much, even though it was a ten-hour flight. The Airbus 340 has comfortable seats in the cabin section with adequate leg room for long distance traveling. I was delighted to know we would be flying from Frankfurt to Lagos on an Airbus 340. On my flights to and from the continent of Africa, I had the opportunity to fly on the two airplanes that I admire the most: The Boeing 747 and the Airbus 340. I am convinced that these two airplanes have the most reliable powerplants in the aviation industry.

We arrived in Lagos at the Murtala Muhammed International airport. The airport is located in Ikeja, Lagos State, Nigeria and is the major airport serving the city of Lagos. Originally known as Lagos International Airport, it was renamed midway during construction for a former Nigerian military head of state, Murtala Muhammed.

During the late 80s and 90s, the international terminal had a reputation of being a dangerous airport. From 1982 through 2000, the United States and the Federal Aviation Administration posted warning signs in all US international airports advising travelers that security conditions at the Lagos airport did not meet ICAO minimum standards. By 1993, the FAA had suspended air service between Lagos and the United States.

By 1997 Olusegun Obasanjo had come to power and the security situation started to improve with a "shoot on sight" policy for violation of airport security. While in Lagos, I read in the newspapers and heard on the news that Nigeria had received its Category 1 rating again, which allowed Nigerian airplanes to fly within United States air space.

Prior to my arrival in Lagos, I had seen a motion picture of city traffic. Believe me, it is not the same when you are in the midst of Lagos traffic. It makes rush hour traffic in any other part of the world insignificant in comparison.

I was highly impressed with the way that people on foot will challenge automobile traffic with their bodies. Many times I put my hands in front of my face in order to avoid what I thought for sure would be contact between an automobile and individual or quite often two automobiles.

I very quickly recognized a significant fact that, in Lagos, your automobile was completely ineffective if the horn did not work. The sound of horns is constant on the major streets of Lagos. It seems that, although they are constantly sounding, everyone seems to ignore the noise they make and do whatever they intended to do anyway...no one pays any attention to them. If there is even an inch available, a driver will take it. To add to the congestion, there are very few traffic lights in the city, which has a population of 14,000,000 people. The automobile horn "rules the road."

The street merchants are the most defiant when it comes to traffic. They hawk their wares in the middle of the street and run between moving and honking automobiles. If they are conducting a negotiation and the traffic starts to move, they will keep up with the moving traffic until it stops again -- even if they have to run several blocks to complete the sale! They show an incredible amount of determination and the simple movement of traffic will not cause them to lose a sale. Their merchandise consists of items that can be hand-carried and not so bulky as to prevent them running if they have to keep up with traffic... some of these items for sale are food and clothing.

There are street merchants in shacks and some are out in the open selling whatever is available to them. In some cases, you may find masterful artwork being sold under the freeway or any available space that is not taken.

It took a while for me to be able to automatically convert the local currency to US dollars. By the end of my two-week stay, I had developed a mental calculation to figure out quickly the relationship between the US dollar and the Naira. One US dollar equals 150 Naira and 15,000 Naira equals \$100 US. I soon discovered that three hundred US dollars converted to Naira was a big amount of cash that I could not carry in my wallet. I had to carry it in my pants pockets and every time I needed Naira, I had to pull out the entire stack, go through it and take out what I needed. I also discovered that a 5 or 10 Naira bill had very little value.

The greatest impression made on me was the one-day trip we took to the city of Badagry. I did not know its history until I got there. It has left what will be a lifelong impression on me. According to our guide who took us to the city, 60 percent of Africans who were transported to the new world came through this city. The city of Badagry was founded around 1492 A.D. Before that time, people lived along the coast. In the early 1500s, slaves were transported from West Africa to America through Badagry. By 1787, it is estimated that 550,000 slaves had been transported through Badagry.

Many of the slaves were captives of war and it has been reported that slaves were never captured in Badagry. Slavery during that time was recognized all over the world. Slaves were employed by Kings, Chiefs and as domestic servants by the wealthy. At that time, the number of slaves one possessed determined social status and economic wealth. Many slaves were captured in tribal wars; however, upon learning that slaves could be traded for goods such as iron bars, whiskey, cotton, linen, and metal slaves were brought to Badagry to be ex-changed for goods. This exchange led to war between groups and fueled tribal wars. Still standing today in Badagry is the old slave-holding quarters, which housed forty slaves per room. These rooms were so crowded that they were almost reduced to standing room only. The city of Badagry wants to share these historic sites, artifacts and relics of human slavery with the world. It is preserving buildings, sites and memories of the slave period for others to see and experience firsthand the chilling effects of slavery.



As I put the chains around my neck to take a picture, I began to tremble. I felt the weight of the chains and they were heavy. I could not smile as the camera recorded the expression on my face. I began to visualize the slave's journey to America, "three months at sea," in chains and in the hold of a ship. The chains got heavier. I thought of my comfortable seat on the Boeing 747 and the Airbus 340 that had brought me to Nigeria.

I was ready for the chains to come off. I took them off...I am back home in California now. Sometimes, in the quiet of night and in the safety of my home, I can still feel the weight of those chains on me. From their slave quarters in chains they would be carried down to the water's edge, which is approximately 200 yards away. They would be put on boats to be carried across the bay to a very small island approximately one mile away. Once on the other side, they were marched down a trail to a half-way point on the island and given water from a well that had been mixed with a narcotic to make them more controllable for their journey to the new world. After drinking the water, they were marched on toward the other side of the Island to waiting ships and begin their journey of "no return."

As I boarded my Lufthansa flight back to Frankfurt, I realized that this was a trip I would never forget. And, to be certain, I brought water back with me taken from the well on the island of Badagry.