

Tourist

From time to time I wonder about revisiting Nigeria. Big country, lots to see. If you like geography it's got plenty, from near-desert to tropical forest. Nigeria has a population of 152 million people who, even if they don't always get on with each other, are friendly to travellers. In the Niger Delta region local hospitality even extends to visitors being accommodated in a delta village for weeks or months at a time, without them even asking for it. It's this sort of heart-warming touristic experience that brings foreigners back to the Niger Delta again and again. Nigeria's police and soldiers can also be relied upon to give you a friendly greeting at their roadblocks. They like tourists.

In studying Nigeria's offerings on the Internet I was pleased to see listed some destinations I had visited when I was a lad. I can return to the beautiful Mayanka Falls near Abuja, for example. The website promises me that, "The fall is located in a remote village where it is still found in its crude state". In former times this was a site of execution, 'mayanka' meaning the 'place of throat cutting' in the Hausa language. This translation was missing from the website, but it can only be a matter of time before a marketing genius sees the possibilities of a Tower-of-London style notoriety.

Ushafa village, in the land of the Gwari people, is still there. Now called Ushafa Pottery Village, it is proud to have been visited by President Bill Clinton. He was given citizenship of the village and was made a chief. Which made him Chief Commander-in-chief I guess. Furthermore, "Pottery making of different sizes and shapes are made and can be purchased". Can't go anywhere without a gift shop these days. Why should Ushafa be different? But I would also want to see something I haven't seen before. In the website menu, just below "Food Recipe", I spotted "Slave Routes". Interesting, I thought.

It turned out to be just one route, namely the one across the Atlantic. On offer is a tour of the former slave-port of Badagry, west of Lagos. There you can see the original barracoons that once held the slaves, and you can view "shackles and locks of various dimensions". The King's Palace is still the official residence of the Akran of Badagry, and includes a "mini-ethnographic museum" where "important visitors are usually conducted around". No mention of a visit by big chief Bill.

Despite all this, I was rather disappointed. I had imagined the Slave Routes category would cover some inland history too. But no mention was made of the route from Ushafa up to northern Nigeria. This was the road travelled by the Gwari, taken as heathen slaves by the pious Muslims of Hausaland.

This trimming of history reminded me of a story a German friend of mine told me. He and his wife visited Plimouth Plantation, a recreation of a 1627 English settlement in Massachusetts in the territory of the Wampanoag nation. One of the must-see features was handicrafts made by Native People. You could watch as a genuine Wampanoag person showed off his basket-weaving skills. My friend started to ask questions about the history of the basket-weaver's people. Hearing this the other (American) tourists scuttled out of the room. At this flagrant ignorance, the basket-weaver exploded with rage and spilled his tale of colonial heartbreak to the astonished German

couple. The loss, the humiliation, the horror. The baskets were cute, but the nastier truths of colonialism were of no interest to his fellow Americans.

Upon my next visit to the country of the friendly policemen I look forward to the opportunity of asking a Gwari potter what she can tell me about the route to Hausaland. Out of earshot of any Hausa tourists naturally.