

ZIGUINCHOR, SENEGAL

Rose Skelton travels to the south of Senegal and experiences partying Ziguinchor-style

Gliding up the Casamance River to the port of Ziguinchor is a blissful experience, full of promise. The engines of Senegal's new ferry have slowed to a bearable pace and everything has stopped shaking enough for passengers to enjoy the view. All around is the deep green of mangroves; the long, languorous river stretches on, a dugout boat glides by, a fisherman casts a circular net into the peaceful waters.

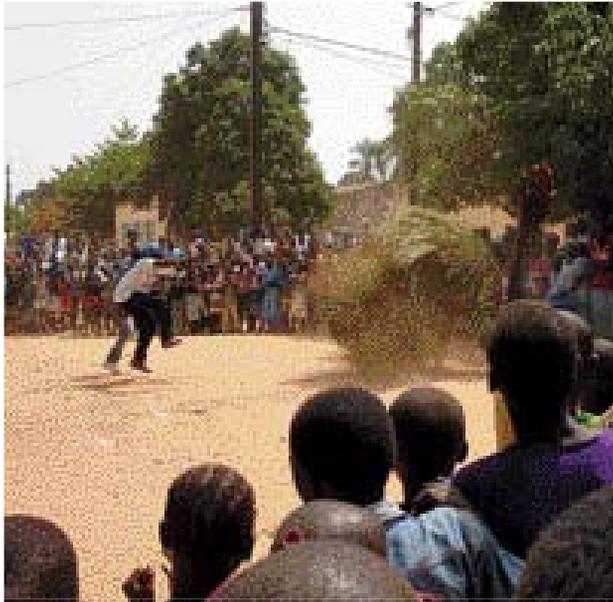
Despite my repeated leaving of Ziguinchor for the bright lights of Dakar, 500km away, I always manage to find a return to the sandy streets of this southern Senegalese town a magical experience. Fixed taxi prices, one main street, the year-round green of mango trees and the never-ending pulse of music make Ziguinchor a rare and tropical paradise, not just an exotic name.

The Casamance region, of which Ziguinchor is the capital, is ethnically different from the rest of the country, and so is its music. The region is the home of the Joola ethnic group who maintain their musical traditions such as the *bombolong*, the enormous hollow village drum which is used to 'telephone' messages of births and deaths across the land. During these big events, the *kumpo* emerges to dance its wild swirling dance, chasing children who scream and run as the layers of its grass outfit threaten to swallow all but the largest up.

Joola music floats alongside the sharp hit of the Wolof *sabar* drum, the deeper beat of the *djembe*, the trickle of the Mande *kora* (harp-lute), and above it all the steady call from the mosque which blankets the town but doesn't dampen its spirits.

When night falls, there is very little street lighting and calm permeates the warm night air. Groups of young people sit under the acacia trees, waiting for mangoes to fall, telling stories in various languages to great eruptions of laughter. Then, a distant noise is heard; it is the beginning of one of Ziguinchor's famous *sabar* drum parties.

When I arrived at my first *sabar* party, it was like stumbling upon an ancient ceremony. Enveloped in darkness, a ring of women, five deep in some places, 200 in total, sat and stood facing the *sabar* orchestra who had set themselves up on a vacant lot of land beside a single light bulb strung from a pole. A ring of boys, giggling furiously,



stood behind the women and never ventured inside the circle. The morning market and the *sabar* party are the domain of women, and men are tolerated, but only just.

No invitations are given to these communal parties. Rather, the party giver – perhaps a group of girls celebrating passing their exams – rely on the sound of the *sabar* orchestra to call excited women and children to the event. The orchestra is usually made up of six or so local boys who have been practising the intricate rhythms of *sabar* in the street after school. Many of Senegal's top musicians had their first paid job playing *sabar* music at parties such as these.

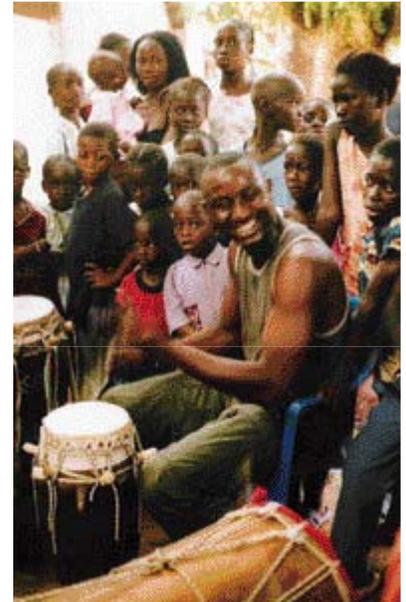
Through the ring of women I could

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see dreadlocked teenagers in batik outfits whacking the tall, slim drums that produce a tight, high sound, similar to Brazilian *batteria*. The drummers' sticks repeatedly splintered under the force of the drumming and a young boy was sent off to cut down more branches and shave them until smooth with a knife.

The beats marched on and with it the electricity crackled around the ring. Then the bandleader came forward, rested his leg on a chair and leaned his drum against it. With his open hand and a freshly cut acacia

Above: the *kumpo* – a Joola ethnic group dance.
Above right: banging out the rhythm of the *sabar* dance on the drums.
Right: the tranquility of the Casamance river



ALL PHOTOS: ROSE SKELTON

branch, he played a finely embroidered solo, incomprehensible to foreign ears, which brought a girl running from the edge of the circle, her shoes thrust aside.

Gathering her colourful skirt folds in one hand she flung the other arm high above her head and kicked her legs, spun around, leaped in the air and landed, flicking her bottom towards the band at the end of the solo, causing the circle of women to erupt in a unified scream of delight. The dancer's friend, inspired by the performance, stepped out of her shoes and ran to in front of the band, meeting another girl on the way, and so it went on until the power was cut sometime after midnight and the group drifted away.

Like everything in Ziguinchor, my first *sabar* party was a magical and unpredictable event. This town, languishing in Senegal's tropical south, is the nation's heartbeat, rarely visited by foreigners or even other Senegalese. And even better, it looks likely to stay that way for a long time to come. ●