

AFRICA

Travel Magazine

Djibouti

*The One-Legged Chef and
other inspiring stories
from Eastern Africa.*





THE ONE-LEGGED CHEF: OF FOOD, FAITH AND

By Charles Reinhardt with Judy Block

The One-Legged Chef is Charles Reinhardt’s inspirational food memoir-in-progress about living an adventure-filled life as an amputee chef from the suburbs of Connecticut who travels to Africa in search of work. A 27-year-old with a personal challenge and a lot to learn, Charlie received an unexpected opportunity in 2006 to become a chef de cuisine and later a purchasing manager at Kempinski’s new Djibouti Palace Hotel. His experiences over two years in Djibouti, Rwanda, and Tanzania focused his life on simple principles: To never, ever use his leg as an excuse, to get the job done no matter what it takes, to live in the moment when that moment promises an unforgettable experience, to immerse himself in the joy and all-consuming exhaustion of a life centered on food, and to help others. Africa Travel Magazine will preview two chapters of The One-Legged Chef. The first, “**A Kitchen Without Gas, A Camel With-**

out a Head, and Chefs Who Can’t Cook,” centers on the challenges Charlie faced, in a hotel that was still under construction, to prepare for the 2006 Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa conference. The second “A Somalie!” tells of his journey across the border of Somalia to purchase a herd of sheep for the festival of Eid al-Adha. (The only “untruths” in Charlie’s story are the

names of several people, which have been changed to allow him to write openly about his experiences.) To learn more about Charlie’s memoir, click on oneleggedchef.com and on The One-Legged Chef Facebook page. A Kitchen Without Gas, a Camel Without a Head, and Chefs Who Can’t Cook

A chef without a kitchen is like a man without a country. An exaggeration? Sure, but only a small one. Here I was in the middle of a desert construction site with orders to get everything right for the 2006 Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa conference that would host 23 African leaders. With no executive chef or executive sous chef to report to, all operational responsibilities fell to me. This was the biggest league I had ever been in, yet we were doing things a beginner wouldn’t do - because we had no choice. Even George Chung, my old boss in New York, understood the need for a soft opening to get the kinks out of the system. We tested Malacca Grill’s menu, food,





FINDING MY WAY IN A TWO-LEGGED WORLD

and service on George's high-profile friends and begged for feedback. Then we corrected our mistakes and prayed that we caught the bugs that could bring us down. There's nothing like being in Africa on an impossible deadline to force Alternate Plan B.

Hiring Staff

My first priority was to hire a kitchen brigade. I needed about twenty people for assistant cook, line cook, butcher and butcher's assistant slots. With a sixty percent unemployment rate, I guessed that the hotel would have a flood of applicants. But I also guessed that finding qualified, experienced help would be a tough plow. Hotel-wide hiring interviews were set up in an unoccupied government building downtown. HR managers assigned screening dates and hours for each department and put notices in local papers. I expected the desert equivalent of a reality TV show open casting call, absent the glamour: "Over 2,000 professionals arrived at the first open call for second season of *The Apprentice* in Burbank," said a casting-call primer. "In some cases, especially with popular shows like *American Idol*, the lines start the day

or evening before." In the next few days, I learned that American expectations have little to do with African realities. An hour before the first interview block, Francois Renard, the hotel's director of operations, and I took a taxi downtown to our makeshift headquarters. The building had electricity, a plus, but no air conditioning, a huge minus. To survive



the heat, we would have to get the applicants in and out and make quick decisions. The sweat was already dripping down my back as we made our way to a conference room. But where were the through-the-corridor, out-the-door, down-the-block lines? They were nowhere in sight. Instead, I saw a group of about a hundred people, a fair mix of men and women, waiting patiently on wooden benches or resting, ass on heels, inches off the ground along the wall. I quickly did the math. Anyone showing up had about a one in five chance of walking out with a job. You couldn't get those odds in the States. I was new here, so passing judgment was easy. I would learn not to do this, but it would take time and hard experience. At this moment, with COMESA hanging over my head, I was baffled by the Djiboutians who didn't show up - who would rather chew khat or sleep under a palm tree than say, "Here I am. I want a job." I asked Francois about it before the first interview. "Charlie, give up your Western standards," he said. "Most Djiboutians don't have any experience working for a private company. They either work for the

government or at Camp Lemonier or do something at the port. Those who don't work are desert nomads or the urban poor who turn into street people.””How do they eat?” I asked.

Work Habits

“The Islamic community is strong, so the four out of ten with jobs share whatever food they have,” he said. “As long as the pot is big enough, there are portions of rice and curry for those without money. And with men allowed to have up to four wives, the women band together to make sure everyone's okay. In so many cases, it's the women who keep the family together while their men chew khat.” “Given half a chance, the women make it through school, move up in government, start a businesses or become secretaries or clerks,” he continued. “The uneducated are roadside khat sellers or moneychangers, if they're lucky.””Get the picture, Charlie, even if a man doesn't have a wife to support him, he isn't banished for being homeless. The fact that it hardly ever rains and never gets cold makes it easier to

survive. When he gets sick, well, he just dies.”We sat down behind a long table and called for the first candidate. Each carried a pile of papers - a resume followed by official certifications from dozens of government agencies attesting to a skill learned, a job held, years in school, health, citi-



zenship, and more. Piles were inches thick for candidates with less than a year's experience. So many stamps from so many bureaucrats signifying so little, I thought. A graceful Issa woman, wearing a head scarf and colorful sari, walked in. She spoke

French, so at least I could hunt and peck at a conversation. I took her papers and asked her to sit down. She was twenty-five, but looked twenty years older. She had passed a governmental exam on hospitality and completed a three-month apprenticeship at the nearby Sheraton hotel. She had also worked as a cook at Planete Hollywood, a local joint with no connection whatsoever to the U.S. chain, except for a name that brought in unknowing locals and tourists. Even with this experience, I wasn't sure she had the background. “Comment est-ce que tu prepares une sauce mayonnaise?” I asked. “Jaune des oeufs, vinaigre, sel, melanger, monter de huile,” she replied without hesitation. “Great!” “Commis. Merci!”

Hire #1 was done. Francois looked at me as she walked out the door. “Is that it?” he asked. “You're hiring her because she knows how to make mayonnaise?” “Look Francois, I know what you're thinking. I've eaten at Planete Hollywood, and it sucks. But we're not go-



ing to find anyone better in this town. I want just two things - a willingness to work and a basic knowledge of ingredients. If we hold out for more, we'll be calling over to the Planete for conference-night take-out."

After seeing all the candidates over two-days, we hired fifteen commis (assistant cooks), three chef de parties (line cooks), a butcher with black teeth from years of khat chewing, and a butcher's assistant. We were lucky to find them since most applicants had no kitchen experience. With another thirty European and Middle Eastern cooks flying in from other Kempinski locations, I told Bugra, my manager, that we were in good shape.

What I told myself was another story. I knew that turning my motley new-hires into a functioning kitchen crew would take time, practical hands-on instruction, and a working kitchen. The fact that I would have no gas until three days before the conference made me nervous. My logistical problem didn't stop the HR team from insisting that I start getting my people into shape. "Charles, you have to build your team," said a determined HR type who clearly had read a lot of management textbooks but who had no clue what I was

facing. "I understand that you don't have a kitchen, but you can't waste this time. You have to teach classes about cooking. You have to introduce your culinary curriculum. They'll get it."

Photo: Camel caravans still cross the desert carrying salt from Djibouti to neighboring Ethiopia and points beyond.

Let me get this straight, I thought to myself. She wants me to take an academic approach with people who barely went to school and who learn by doing? She wants me to give cooking lessons in pigeon French without a stove instead of focusing on the things I could actually accomplish like ordering food, planning menus, and organizing the kitchen? I was the last manager to make my way to the rented compound near the oil port of Doraleh, just west of Port de Peche. All the new employees lived there during construction, and classes were held in adjacent trailers. Wearing a crisp white chef's jacket, I entered the classroom and saw my team sitting in a large half circle facing a blackboard. The men wore

everything from blue jeans to colorful sarongs, the African equivalent of kilts. Most of the women wore sarongs, but some dressed in Western skirts or slacks. All but one wore a head covering.

Familiar rules don't apply

They stood and said in unison, "Bonjour, Chef Charles!" This simple welcome reminded me that U.S. kitchen rules didn't apply. No cooks or butchers in Chicago or New York or even Iowa City would ever acknowledge the kitchen hierarchy in this way, even if their jobs depended on it. I imagined what the guys at the Drake Hotel in Chicago would think if they saw this scene: "Grovel to a shit in a white coat. Not on your life."

"Bonjour, chefs," I replied, and they took their seats. I felt awkward at first, as I struggled with the language. I talked about international hotel standards for the a la carte menu, including filet mignon sauce bordelaise, spaghetti Bolognese, and roast chicken au jus. I tried to explain how the dishes were prepared and asked if they had ever cooked or tasted them. I kept talking. They kept listening until I realized that I was violating one of Kempinski's basic kitchen tenets – to serve





local as well as cosmopolitan fare. Like a colonialist forcing Western food on a subjugated people, I was designing menus for a five-star hotel in the middle of Djibouti without including a single local dish. I stopped myself midsentence and asked, “What do you think of including some African dishes on the menu? Do you have ideas?”

Ali Abdullah quickly raised his hand and said “Samboussa! My mother makes the best. She taught me.” Immediately, ten others yelled out, “You’re crazy! My mother does, my mother does.” I expected culture shock, but not this. I was watching a group of twenty- to forty-year-old cooks in a screaming match over their mothers’ cooking. I asked all the volunteers to hand in samboussa recipes that we could use in the kitchen. Small triangular packages of ground beef, onions and spices, with flavors that reflect its origins in North Africa and India, samboussa would be a good bar appetizer for guests looking for earthy flavors.

Djiboutian Samboussa

(yields 25-30 pieces)

Ingredients

2 liters (about gallon) vegetable oil heated to 350° in a deep pot

1/4 pound (plus a little) all purpose flour

1 pound ground beef

2 medium onions
1 leek
1 teaspoon cumin
Salt and pepper to taste

Instructions

Sift the flour and a pinch of salt into a bowl. Add just enough water so that the mixture comes together as a stiff dough. Shape into a ball and allow to rest.

Peel and quarter the onions. Cut off the root and the hard green top leaves from the leek. Slit the remaining white section from root to top through all the layers. Wash thoroughly to remove the grit.

Place onions and leek into a food processor and mince.

Add 4 tablespoons oil to a frying pan and brown the meat for a few minutes.

Add the onions, leek and cumin; season with salt and pepper. Continue to cook until the meat is done and the onions soft.

Roll the pastry out on a floured surface and cut into triangles. Place a tablespoon of the meat mixture in the center of the triangle and fold over to form a samboussa.

Heat the oil in a wok until almost smoking, and place one samboussa at a time in the oil.

Cook until golden brown and crisp on all sides. Remove with a slotted spoon.

Drain on paper towels and serve with hot sauce.

What is Doro Wat?

When I asked for another recipe, a young woman stood up and started speaking in flawless English that told me that she was more educated than the others. Melesse was also the only woman in the class without a head scarf. “Where are you from? I asked, “and where did you learn to speak English?”

“My parents are Ethiopian, but my father works here,” she answered. “I just finished university in Addis Ababa and am staying with them now. As for a suggestion, you should serve Doro Wat. It’s a national dish from Ethiopia with braised chicken and boiled eggs in a tomato curry. I have the recipe if you’re interested.”

Doro Wat is served on large flat bread, called injira, made with teff, a grass found in Ethiopia and Eritrea that is now being cultivated in Idaho and Kansas. Similar to millet and quinoa, teff has a high concentration of dietary fiber, protein, iron, and calcium and cooks quickly. At the hotel, we served doro wat for dinner accompanied by Ethiopian butter known as niter kibbeh.

Melesse's Recipe for Doro Wat (serves four)

Ingredients

1 whole organic free-range chicken, about 3 lbs.
1 lb. red onions, washed and skin removed
1 cups water
1 tablespoons chili powder
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 tablespoon curry powder
1 lbs. Roma tomatoes, quartered
1 tablespoons sea salt
1 tablespoon Ethiopian butter (recipe follows)
1 small heads of garlic
8 whole hard-boiled eggs, shells removed
2 tablespoons peanut oil

Instructions

Break down the chicken into eight pieces (two wings, breasts, legs and thighs). Season with salt and pepper, and brown in a pan with oil over medium-high heat. Remove the chicken and reserve for later.
Mince the red onions, and place in the same pan (unwashed), and stir while cooking over medium-high heat. Before the onions brown, add a cup and a half of water and the chili powder. Stir to fully incorporate. Immediately add the tomato concentrate and stir.
Add the curry powder.
Add the tomatoes, sea salt, Ethiopian butter, garlic, chicken pieces, and eggs. Cook on low, covered, for about 35 minutes, or until the chicken is done. Serve with Injira.

Niter Kibbeh

(Ethiopian butter) Makes 2 cups

Ingredients

1 lb. unsalted butter
2 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
1 tablespoon sliced ginger
3 cardamom seeds
1 cinnamon stick

3 cloves
teaspoon tumeric
teaspoon fenugreek seeds

Instructions

Heat butter in a pan on the lowest possible heat until it is melted. Add the other ingredients and stir. Cook for one hour on low heat. Pass through cheesecloth and discard solids.
Pour into a container and let cool on the counter. Then cover and store in the refrigerator for up to two weeks and in the freezer for three months.

Photos: Above (left) Main dining room buffet spread at the Djibouti Palace Kempinski. 2. Exterior front entrance to the hotel.

Injira

Ingredients

1 cup ground teff flour (you can substitute barley flour if needed)
1 1/3 cup water
Salt
Vegetable oil for sauté pan

Instructions

Mix teff flour and water in a bowl, and leave at room temperature covered with a dish towel (not touching the mixture) for three days, or until the mixture begins to bubble. This is the fermentation process.
Stir in about tablespoon salt (so you can just taste it).
Heat a 10" sauté pan over a medium heat with enough oil to cover the bottom.

Pour mixture into the pan, just thinner than a pancake (but not too thin) and cook until the top bubbles and the injira can be lifted from the pan. It cooks only on one side, and should not brown. Place a piece of parchment paper between each so they don't stick.
Serve on the plate and place Doro wat on top of the injira.
Eat with your hands with the use of the injira.

Creating the Menu

The suggestions kept coming for foods I never heard of but was eager to try. Thanks to the class, zizil wat and alidja wat, beef and goat dishes served on teff, became luncheon staples.

As I walked from the room, I was struck by the enthusiasm I had witnessed. Was I the only person in authority to ask them what they thought? Probably. Was I the only white man to ask? Absolutely. Living under the French colonial umbrella for over a hundred years left a mark on the Djiboutian people and even on the individuals I met in the classroom that day. Only Melesse was different, maybe because she wasn't a local.

"Why did you leave Ethiopia?" I asked as she walked along side of me.

"The pay there is so low. I couldn't survive, so I came to the hotel. I'm embarrassed to say that I can't cook very well, but all the other departments were full."

It was true. All the positions were taken except for some expat slots, and I never interviewed her. Me-





lesse's father was affiliated with the Ethiopian embassy, so strings were pulled. I was happy they were.

"What can you do?" I asked.

"I studied maths at the university. I want to go into business."

It was simple from there. I made Melesse the kitchen storekeeper on top of her other duties. It was her job to organize daily requisitions from the hotel storerooms and coolers. She would help calculate food costs through weekly inventories, make sure the storage areas were clean, and act as my interpreter with the kitchen staff. Given her background and responsibilities, the local cooks looked up to her and liked her. She made it easy for them, never acting superior because of her education. She was also gorgeous, which had every male cook in a heap at her feet.

Relationships and Culture

None of the crew was used to the respect Melesse showed them, especially those who had worked with French nationals. Creating a relationship of equals that valued the local culture was not what the French were about in 2006 nor when they ruled what was then known as French Somaliland. As you may know, and I won't preach, the French, like the Belgians, the British, the Germans, and others took great interest in

Africa during the nineteenth century, but placed no importance on the natural pre-colonial tribal borders. Whether it was by force, coercion, bribes, or blackmail, Africa was divided, and the white Europeans set up aristocratic systems that mirrored their own and that destroyed the natural order.



Historian Wallace G. Mills described the relationship between France and its African colonies in this way: "Those who worked with the French were "subordinate cogs in the bureaucracy for carrying out policies which were developed by expatriate French officials with no consultation with Africans."^b As the last French colony to achieve independence, Djibouti continues to carry the burdens of the past. Indeed, its very existence as a country sandwiched among the hostile states of Somalia and Eritrea and consisting of peoples with major ethnic differences was to serve the global interests of France in the Gulf

of Aden and Red Sea.

In the United States, education fuels mobility and hope, but in Djibouti, only the extraordinary and the privileged made it through. During the colonial period, said Mills, education was limited to those who spoke French, and the textbooks were exactly the same as those used in Paris.

(A bit odd, don't you think, that Djiboutians can trace their history to "our ancestors the Gauls"?) Today, primary school attendance is compulsory and free and more than half of eligible children are enrolled. But with no monitoring of school attendance and with the struggles of daily life and the desert heat, many kids

drop out after a few years. The fact that only 2,200 students are enrolled at the Université de Djibouti makes sense. For the rest, it's just too hard. My leg. What a piece of cake.

A great hotel emerges

The official opening of the Djibouti Palace Kempinski took place two days before the COMESA conference start date. It was marked by Islamic traditions, including the sacrifice of a seven-foot tall baby camel. Bugra called me to his office and told me to set up a place for the sacrifice in the back of house. "Who's going to do it?" I asked. "I don't know, one of the guys bringing it in, I guess."



I was fascinated by the idea and reality of this ritual slaughter, maybe because chefs consider butchery a high art. Whenever I am breaking down a lovely rabbit or a fat, juicy rib eye, I am at peace as I make the most of the offering. In a professional kitchen, there is nothing like standing alone in a cool, quiet corner cutting meat. No one disturbs you, and you are left with the grace and skill of your knife. You carefully weigh portions and wrap individual cuts and even think of recipes while you hold the meat in your hands.

Skills of the kitchen

Even better, though, is when the actual killing and butchery are combined. Skinning your own animal, breaking down the parts, and cooking a special recipe create an almost primitive feeling that brings the meal to a higher level. It's the same with fish. Eating a fish I've caught is always better than eating someone else's catch. Chefs know this better than anyone because they connect the food source with what's on the plate and see all the steps from slaughter to eating as part of a ritual. Therefore, I actually shivered when I heard that about the camel slaughter. I knew I had to witness a moment in time where God opens the bounty of nature

and man takes the sustenance.

I stood in a corner as they led the camel through the employee entrance, down the back-of-the-house hallway, and into the butcher shop I had prepared earlier. I used body language to signal to the butchers that I wanted to watch. They spoke only Arabic but understood when I pointed to the animal and then to myself.

Prayer for the camel

One pulled a black hood from his bag and tied it over the camel's head. The animal waited calmly as they chanted Islamic prayers. To this day, I'm not sure what made me lock eyes with the butcher again, point to myself and to the camel, hold out my hand, and nod my head. Without hesitating, the butcher handed me his sword. I was exhilarated as I looked down at the curved blade. "Wait!" I thought. "How am I supposed to do this?" Then a calm came over me. I had slaughtered hundreds of game

before, and this was another animal - a source of food that was also a ritual sacrifice.

I raised the blade slowly, let out a soft breath, and looked up at the beast. In one shot, I sliced through his neck, downing the animal in less than a second. The body shook a few times before coming to rest. Blood was rushing out, but we stood still in reverence. There was no sadness, but a familiar sense of awe for taking a life as a sacrifice and for food. The butchers prayed to Allah, and then I added something from the New Testament. They bowed their heads through my prayer, just as I had done through theirs.

Taking part in this sacrifice helped me step beyond the West in a visceral way. I participated in a ritual that had great meaning to the Djiboutian people at a moment of great importance. The ceremony was steeped in Islamic traditions that dated back centuries. Playing such a huge role helped me see that I had not only

traveled 7,017.2 miles to get here, but also sailed across the centuries. Would I do it again if given the opportunity? In a heartbeat, I'm sure.

As promised, the kitchen was ready three days before the



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conference. With no time to spare, I watched my crew in action for the first time. They were awful. They could not broil a hamburger. They could not cook spaghetti without turning it to mush. In fact, they couldn't even prepare the mayonnaise whose ingredients they knew so well. (Did they all memorize the recipe just for their interviews?) Their incompetence shocked Francois, who started screaming. And Dirk, the Dutch sous who had flown in from Switzerland, started throwing pots. Within seconds, Djibouti was a French colony again populated by ignorant Africans who didn't know the difference between a full boil and a simmer. "They can't do shit," Dirk said. "How the fuck can we do this with these fucking children?" He called them children. You just can't make these things up. I understood the frustration, but knew that anger would shut everyone down. With no plan except to try to find relief, I turned to Melesse for help. "What needs to happen?" I asked. I was almost pleading. She looked at the group, said something in Somali and listened as they poured out their feelings. Only after everyone had spoken did she address me again. "Chef Charles, they are tired. They don't speak English and have trouble understanding your French. They want to make you proud. They want to cook for their President. They are frustrated and scared."

No one had to tell me that this was an important moment. Maybe God was with me, but I knew what I had to do. Whether we wanted to or not, whether we had the time or not, we had to find a way to empower the crew because yelling and pot throw-

ing and colonialist attitudes wouldn't work. Not in Africa. Not anywhere. I assigned each Djiboutian to an experienced task force cook who was told not to touch anything or cook anything. They were to be mentors who watched, tasted, and talked to the beginners about ingredients, techniques, and process. They would help them understand the flow of the kitchen. They would teach them the basics - why certain things like soup and salad dressings could be made a day in advance, where they should store cooked and uncooked foods, how to break down full beef loins



into steaks, and how to clean fish with minimal waste. Within a few hours, I heard the familiar sounds of a functioning kitchen.

With the crisis over, we readied for the opening. With 600 guests arriving in a matter of hours, we had to go through the drills for breakfast and brunch in the restaurant, room service meals, and dinners. And then there was the state dinner with the President of Djibouti to take place the day after opening. The menu, which was planned and approved,

had to be cooked to perfection. Here's what we served...

- *Cream of mushroom soup with mushroom dumplings and truffle essence*
- *Citrus salad of arugula, orange, and walnuts*
- *Choice of roasted beef tenderloin or dorade served with potatoes and maitre d'hotel*
- *Trio of chocolate: mousse, cake, and truffles*

In an American or European hotel kitchen, this meal is routine, even for a large group. We were thousands of miles away, but fortune was on our side. The dinner went off without a hitch.

The next morning, right after the breakfast rush, I was approached by two security guards who asked me to follow them. They brought me upstairs where I met with the private chef of the Zambian president. He asked permission to cook in my kitchen along with the Rwandan president's chef and handed me an envelope with a bribe. In exchange for the money, I would tell no one about the lessons. "Of course,

" I said. "It would be my honor to share my kitchen with two great men."

At the end of the day, I put the equivalent of \$20 in the hand of each cook - about three days pay. Then I lied. "Ladies and gentlemen, I am so proud of you. But more importantly, so is your President. He asked me to give each of you a small cadeau, a gift, to thank you for the great work you are doing for Djibouti."

Recognition - Appreciation

They cheered. After a grueling few weeks, they needed and deserved this recognition. They were stepping out of their shells, learning skills, and showing pride in their work. They weren't used to accomplishing so much under pressure or to having a sense of potential. Most couldn't take it in right away. But I saw what it meant. They had a future in Djibouti, they had career paths, and soon they would begin to dream. I fell asleep that night for the first time not thinking of home. But in the next days and weeks, I realized that the challenge was far from over.

A Somalie!

When I was a child, I went to Sunday school at the Trinity Episcopal Church in Southport, Connecticut to learn bible stories, including those from the Old Testament. I took them all in stride - sometimes when other kids found them tough going. Even the one about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moria was okay with me. It was God's way of testing Abraham's faith. When Abraham got through it and Isaac lived, I remember thinking that there are tests none of us understands.

When I arrived in Djibouti, I was surprised to learn that a variation of this story was part of Islam, with a change in a key player and some spelling. Eid al-Adha commemorates Ibrahim's willingness to offer Ishmael to God on Mount Marwah. Occurring at the end of the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the "Festival of Sacrifice" lasts three days and is big on animal offerings. Slaughtered camels, rams, cows, and goats are given to family, friends, and even employees. It is a time when religion comes before com-

merce and deference must be paid. Getting it right is high stakes for every European and American company doing business in the Islamic world.

New to Djibouti, Kempinski wanted to impress with the quality, quantity, and timeliness of its gifts to a people who were the first to adopt Islam in Africa. So when Bugra put me in charge of fresh-meat acquisition and told me to round up, slaughter, and wrap enough livestock for 200 employees, there was no room for failure. I decided on sheep since they cost less than the other options and were easy to transport. Figuring a quarter of an animal per worker, I had to purchase and butcher about 50 sheep with 10 spares. This was not going to be easy, since the festival was only a week away.

Minutes after getting the assignment, Saleh and I jumped into a pickup truck and drove to local sheep farms in the desert. A savvy Djiboutian of Yemini descent Saleh spoke French, rudimentary English, and all the local languages and was my friend and guide. As far as I could see, I was looking at a churning ocean with waves of white, gray, and black. The waves were predictable and rhythmic except when an occasional sheep mounted his neighbor for a couple of

pulls in and out. I learned later that males and females were separated, which apparently didn't matter to some participants. All the herds were taken by the time we arrived - 12,000 sheep were headed elsewhere. So Saleh turned to me and said something I thought I would never hear.

"A Somalie!"

To Somalia? "Are you kidding?" I asked.

"It's too late here," he answered. "But a friend knows where to find herds right near the border. I trust him."

"Then let's do it. But for God's sake, make sure we don't get lost."

I remembered what Ambassador Stuart Symington told me about a week into my stay. He had arrived just about the time I did and invited me to the Ambassador's residence when he learned that his brother attended my family's Connecticut church. During a relaxed lunch, he laid down a rigid, never-to-be-crossed ground rule for an American living in Djibouti: stay clear of the borders. The official U.S. Department of State travel warning reinforced his message:

The Department of State warns U.S. citizens against all travel to Somalia, including northern Somalia.... There is no U.S. Embassy or other U.S. diplomatic presence in Somalia. Consequently, the U.S. government is not in a position to assist or effectively provide services to U.S. citizens in Somalia.... Kidnapping, murder, illegal roadblocks, banditry, and other violent incidents and threats to U.S. citizens and other for-



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eigners can occur in many regions. Inter-clan and inter-factional fighting flares up with little or no warning. d

Why did I ignore these warnings? Did surviving ten leg operations convince me that nothing could touch me, that while I might lose a leg, I would not lose my life even when the stakes were high? Risk would be managed, I told myself, as it had been in the hospitals, with the pain medication and the infections. And geography was on my side. Right? I would be nuts to go anywhere near Mogadishu in the south, but hundreds of miles north was safe. Right? Sure, there were a few scattered pirate camps here and there, but wasn't there also a "budding tourist industry?" If the government is courting tourists, it must be safe. Right? I put the dangers out of my head as I focused on what I had to accomplish: I needed 60 or so sheep, and it looked like Somalia was the only place to get them.

The Somalian border was 20 kilometers from the resort. Getting across without being spotted was not going to be easy since the Djiboutian border guards as well as the CIA and U.S. military were on constant watch for infiltrating terrorists. Alerts and shut downs at the American base at Camp Lemonier were a fact of life as were embassy warnings to all U.S. nationals. With information about where the border guards were and where they were not, we mapped out a course over the coastal mountains that took us in the direction of the sheep. Had Saleh been alone, he could have taken a direct route right through the checkpoints – just another Djiboutian traveling to and from Somalia on business. In fact, the nomadic nature of the Issa and Afar made crossing into Somalia common, although the nomads usually journeyed with herds of cattle

and goats. It was my American visa that forced the rerouting.

We packed the car with six baguettes, three cans of Omar tuna, four bottles of Coca-Cola, six liters of Crystal water, and an envelope stuffed with about a half million Djibouti francs (the equivalent of about \$3,000) and left the city a little after midnight, heading south east. The road was a hilly, wide, dirt path pocked with holes left by accelerating vehicles. Traveling at 80 kph – as fast as we could go considering road conditions – we were on a desert roller coaster, guided only by our headlights, bright moonlight, and a sketchy map. When we were near the border, Saleh drove slowly to keep the guards from hearing our noisy engine. I prayed that the transmission, which was a problem from the start, would not give out. At one point, I caught sight of a post and slapped Saleh on the shoulder. "Fermez les lumieres!" He turned the headlights off, and we crept on. A half hour later, we turned the lights back on, found the coastline, and picked up speed. It was not long before we turned off the main road and began climbing a steep hill.

We arrived at the farm at six in the morning. There was nothing else around but thousands of sheep and a single Yemenite shepherd, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, who came out to meet us. He was eager to do business. Since I spoke no Arabic, Saleh was in charge. For the next twenty minutes, I watched their faces and body language as they worked out the deal.

They stood inches apart – in an up-close-and-personal zone that Americans rarely invade. (I would have gotten my ass kicked in my old Brooklyn neighborhood if I came that close to anyone except a girl I

was about to kiss.) And they never stopped touching; arms, shoulders, chests were in play as the haggling became heated. It was obvious that Saleh was dominant. He stood straight, spoke loudly, and never took his eyes off the herdsman. He was really good at this game. I stood by, mute, listening for the few Arabic words I knew in an attempt to figure out what was happening. Finally, Saleh turned to me, and spoke in broken English so the farmer would not understand.

"He want 6,000 for each mouton."

"Do it," I replied. "I'll pay that much." Burgra would be thrilled to get the sheep at that price. And it wouldn't hurt my career to deliver the load and an envelope stuffed with 200,000 unused francs.

In retrospect, I had witnessed two Arabs in their element. Although they were on opposite sides of a business deal, they were linked by a bond of kinship and centuries-old haggling traditions that excluded Westerners. More than the language barrier, it was this bond and traditions that kept me from understanding what was taking place. When Saleh placed his hand on the herdsman's shoulder and uttered a few words, when the herdsman backed off and turned to the herd penned 200 yards down the hill, when the herdsman pointed and slowly shook his head, the deal was over. The herdsman realized that Saleh held the upper hand and that he had to make a deal. Eid al-Adha was in a few days, there were no more sheep in Djibouti, but Saleh was one of the few Djiboutians who had crossed the border. The jihadist problems in the south, near Mogadishu, and growing tensions with Ethiopia were scaring buyers away. A final word between them was all it took, and to this day



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I have no idea what it was. When the herdsman turned to Saleh with a smile of resignation, the deal was done.

We shook hands and moved quickly to the logistics. Saleh explained that the herdsman's brother-in-law could move across the border no questions asked, and would deliver the 64 heads by truck the next day. I paid him half up front and promised half upon delivery. Business done, we jumped in the truck and headed back, this time in the direction of the border crossing,

which we reached at about nine in the morning after a long nap in the back of the truck. The guards looked at Saleh's passport and my visa and waved us through. No demand for a bribe? Yea, that made sense. Corruption in Djibouti took place at higher levels and on a much grander scale than a border guard demanding a few francs. Then again, maybe they thought I was with the CIA.

As promised, the sheep arrived the next day and were herded into the hotel loading dock, which was now fenced in and covered with hay. One of the easiest ways to preserve meat without refrigeration is to keep the animals alive. The poor understand this. They throw a lamb over their shoulder or put it in a small wagon and carry it over mountains without the meat going bad. We kept the animals in the pen for two more days. This gave us time to build scaffolds on which to hang the bodies after



they were slaughtered.

On the day of the festival, I watched as the butchers led the sheep out of the dock one at a time. Following the rituals of Islamic slaughter, known at dhabiah, they used a machete to administer a single swift cut to the animal's throat that severed the jugular vein, carotid arteries, trachea and esophagus, but kept the spinal cord in tact. The animals died instantly as their blood drained onto the concrete floor. It struck me as ironic that in a world where Muslims and Jews are at each other's throats and where peace is so elusive, both groups share the same techniques of ritual animal slaughter.

We hung each sheep on the scaffold on a hook attached through the Achilles tendon. I watched as the butchers sliced the belly from chest to balls, and took a step back as the intestines, stomach, and general guts slipped out. These were thrown in

garbage bags along with the lungs, heart, and genitalia and sent to our butcher in town for separation and cleaning. The livers, hearts, and kidneys were staples in the employee cafeteria. I was interested in the balls for Rocky Mountain oysters, but with no shared interest, we scrapped that idea. I guess no one wanted to have a go at the thirty-ball record Chevy Chase set in the movie *Funny Farm*, before he found out what tasted so good.e

Our last step was to quarter each sheep

and wrap it in plastic bags to be passed to the employees later that evening. We finished with only an hour to spare. Our feat was the talk of the city, and I felt that I had been part of something bigger than myself. But the what-ifs came to me in the middle of the night. What if Somalia pirates had captured us? What if we had gotten lost? What if the border guards had shot us when we passed their post? The jitters didn't leave me for many nights as I thought more about what gave me the courage to take the risk. Where was my leg in all this? It had to be there, but where? Was it just carrying me along, step by step, or was it playing with my head again? For as long as I could remember, I needed to go as far as possible to prove that I was ready for anything – that I was someone who would get up and say, "Let's go to Somalia. Sounds like a great idea! I can handle it." A bit more than one foot in front

of the other, I think.

But maybe proving that I was whole was only part of it. Maybe I also wanted to do something that was important to others, without complaint. Dr. Viktor Frankl, who survived three years in Nazi concentration camps and devoted the rest of his life to helping people find meaning in the face of struggle, always asked one simple question: “What does life at this moment demand of me?” “Happiness, cannot be pursued,” he said. “It must ensue. Happiness must happen. Life should find us out there in the world doing good things for their own sakef.”

Saleh and I made a pact to never talk about our trek to Somalia. If Burgra ever found out, I was convinced that he would fire the two of us and ship me back to my comfortable suburban Connecticut home.

(Endnotes)

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c. For an important article about the end of the French control of Djibouti, see Edward Morgan, “The 1977 Elections in Djibouti: A Tragi/Comic End To French Colonial Rule,” *Horn of Africa*, July/September 1978, Volume 1, Number 3, p 47+. Available on the Internet at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1505454

d. Travel Warning: Somalia,” United States Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs. Accessed November 20, 2009 at http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_933.html#

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