



An Eye on West Africa

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I believe that (at least for frequent travellers) the two main things you remember about a hotel stay are the food and the staff. I generally can't remember much about the bedroom or what the hotel looked like. But ask me about the breakfast buffet, or the attitude of the staff, and I'll have an answer.

Now, what I am about to share with you isn't really a breakfast issue, but I shall return to that.

I was in Abuja recently and twice fell afoul of the Nigerian fantasy menu. It's most common in a hotel but one such occurrence was in a nice-looking café.

Here's the scenario. The owner of the hotel, or restaurant, or café, knows that he needs tables and chairs; plates and cups and saucers; knives and forks and spoons etc, so goes ahead and orders them. He knows he needs staff, so he hires them. And we're getting to the point now – a restaurant or café needs a menu, so let's write one, the longer the better, to fill those multi-page menu holders. So the menu gets written and only then does the owner decide what the chef can cook, or is able to cook with the equipment provided. We now have a menu, and we have what the chef can cook, and the relationship between the two is, at the best, tenuous.

I'm a maximiser; when I'm looking for something I need to assess everything on offer and choose the one which will give me maximum satisfaction. Optimisers take a quick look and choose something that sounds good to them. I can't do that. I will carefully assess every item on the menu, and pick the one that ticks all of my mental boxes. And my unfortunate skill lies in choosing the very thing on the menu that is *not* available.

Why couldn't the waiter have said, when giving me the menu, something along the lines of "very sorry sir, but the stewed vulture isn't available today, may I suggest the baked buzzard instead?"

Why? Because the likelihood is that this expansive document is a fantasy menu.

"Do you have that?"

"No."

"Fried chicken?"

"No."

"Beef skewer?"

"No."

"Then what *do* you have?"

At which point the waiter looks at the menu, in a way that suggests he has never seen it before, and says I can have the steamed vegetables or Indomie.

For those who don't know what Indomie is, it's a small packet of dried, instant noodles, which retails for about 15 US cents. Add boiling water and it's a quick snack that, according to the adverts, smiling mums give their smiling children when they get home from school. Not what I go to a restaurant for. Nothing else is available, except rice, which I don't

eat for dietary reasons, and chips.

The most extraordinary experience I had of the fantasy menu was in Sokoto, in a huge hotel where I think my colleague and I were the only guests. Expansive menu, page after page, but the warning sign was the Grilled Lobster. On the edge of the Sahara. "Do you have everything on this menu?"

"No sir."

"What do you have?"

"Meat or fish."

No menu description, just meat or fish.

For breakfast I ordered fried eggs, sunny side up, with toasted bread. I got an omelette, of which I'm not a great fan. That was partly my fault, because in Nigeria fried eggs is indeed an omelette. I showed them a picture on-line of a beautiful sunny-side up version, and they agreed that they should have given me that.

Back to dinner and the fantasy menu. I had an idea, that I would ask for those fried eggs again (sunny-side up, of course), with chips. Mindful of the morning's experience, I showed the chef my picture, and she agreed to cook me that. Then she didn't.

In the café, my experience was much the same. But this time I did what I should have done in the hotel, and asked "do you have everything on this menu?", with the objective of finding out what was not available.

"Yes," came back the answer, "we have everything."

My full-on scan resulted in me ordering the chicken wrap.

"You have that?"

"Yes."

Five minutes later the waiter tells me that the chef had to go to the market to get the chicken, and it may take a while. So hang the menu, I had a meat pie from the cabinet on the counter.

Does food and beverage matter? You bet it does.

My message to hoteliers reading this is: up your game in the F&B department, or lose your guests. I just don't want the hassle of your fantasy menu. Give me a simple menu, with just three or four options *which are available all the time*.

And to those of you staying in hotels in Nigeria – first, make sure you always ask whether everything on the menu is available. Second, don't believe them when they say yes, and third, ask them "what do you have" and, finally, just in case, eat with your eyes – that meat pie in the cabinet was actually very good. ■

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