

TRAVEL

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Up the river to Timbuktu

Once a byword for the ends of the earth, Mali's fabled desert city feels as remote as ever

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Orange-brown water and marsh grass stretched as far as we could see. An elegant, white-headed African sea eagle gazed down imperiously from a riverside tree as our boat glided past. Globes of weaverbird nests dangled precariously from shrubs, like lanterns waiting to be lit come nightfall. Hovering above the water we saw pied kingfishers, black and white like checker-board. Chestnut-colored African jacanas walked delicately over the plate-sized leaves and creamy-white flowers of water lilies burgeoning in the shallows.

It seemed a little surreal. After all, Mali is one of the most arid countries in the world, much of it sanded over by the Sahara. But the Niger river is its lifeblood and we were traveling a couple of hundred kilometers of it by pirogue — the local long canoe-shaped boats with woven roofs and an outboard motor — from Mopti to the once-fabled Timbuktu. A three-day journey.

Our adventure started in Mali's capital, Bamako, a straggling, curate's egg sort of place; a scatter of impressive buildings but much of it shanty-like. From there we headed to Segou, 200km north east by minibus.

We passed women pounding pestles on to giant mortars at the roadside, mixing the resultant brown slurry by hand. This didn't look like the skincare center of Mali but the resulting "butter" — made from shea nuts — is very effective for treating skin problems. At about 1,000 Malian francs (US\$2) per liter, it certainly outstumps Clinique on price. Odor is a different issue.

On the east bank of the Niger, a waterway four times as wide as the Thames, Segou is a center for making traditional wooden pinasses and pirogues (smaller, canoe-shaped open fishing boats). Boat builders using hand tools were shoehorned among people washing themselves and their clothes; there were donkeys galore; and an array of hawkers selling anything from jewelry, cloth and CDs of Malian music.

Distances here are large: Mali is twice the size of France. Pressing on the next day to Djenne, we settled in for well over 300km of tree-scattered savanna. Minus any lions or herds of wildebeest. The French colonialists did for most large animals and the locals long since finished them off. But you will spot intriguingly colorful birds among the trees. And if you're into "I Spy," T for termite mound and B for baobab — that sumo wrestler of the tree world with its curiously obese trunk — are dead certs. One of my companions, though, found the travel tedious. It was MMBA, he said: "mile after mile of bloody Africa."

Famed for its huge mosque — the largest *banco* structure (a mix of mud, chaff and water) in the world — Djenne, built on an island between the Niger and Bani rivers, is spoilt by its open sewers. Swathes of plastic waste add to the squalor. All the same, the world-heritage listed mosque is impressive, softly contoured and topped off with a few ostrich eggs, the whole thing reminiscent of some early collaboration between Dali and Gaudi.

We visited our local guide's home in a village nearby. Senossa was awash with children, like every village in Mali, all smiling, all excited, and all disarmingly eager to hold our hands, tag along ... and ask for *cadeaux*. The town was smell-free. Villagers dig cesspits and have a roster for clearing up litter. These were Fulani people, formerly



nomadic cattle herders, distinguishable as an ethnic group by two small nicks in the skin next to one eye.

Vieux, our guide, introduced us to his uncle, the village head, and gave us graphic descriptions of the tools used for circumcising boys aged 7. We saw the village's honeymoon suite, a room with a larger than average mattress on the floor, a mosquito net and vibrant pink taffeta curtains.

A day later we were in Mopti. From here we set off down river by pirogue after a comfortable night at the pleasant Hotel Kanaga located on the mahogany tree-lined Avenue du Fleuve along the riverfront.

Food in Mali is pretty good, a part-legacy from French colonial days. *Capitaine* — the local name for Nile perch — is found on most menus grilled, en brochette or in a variety of sauces, a culinary delight. Good with haricot vert or plantain.

On the river we passed an occasional Bozo fisherman hand-throwing his net from a pirogue, a friendly wave always returned. Primitive fishing villages perched on shallow banks, some of them flooded and abandoned because our visit coincided with the biggest flood for 20 years. Good news: plenty of rice will be grown and hauls of fish dried to last until next year's rains.

Chugging on, we crossed shallow Lake Debo, one of the few permanent areas of water in this biblical flood land, covering maybe 20,000km² of marsh and farmland. Skeins of duck and egrets glided in the distant sky.

We spotted a couple of hippos almost submerged in a muddy inlet. Male golden bishops, the size of starlings, perched on nearby reeds, fluffing out their vibrant yellow heads and rising on fast-beating wings a 0.5m to 1m in the air before landing again, a display to the brown females that made them look like giant bumblebees.

We twice camped on the riverbank in gloriously isolated sandy spots. Unfamiliar raucous bird calls, the sun's globe setting over the water, a rustle of warm breeze as the coal-black African night descended. It may be a cliché but it was simply idyllic.

Atanou Saye, our ever-smiling cook, brewed a wine-red tea mid-morning, a hot fruity drink made from wild vernilion hibiscus flowers. Lunch was a fresh salad with tinned tuna, sardines and bread, served as we glided through some of the wildest marshes and waterways in Africa.

We moored for provisions at Niafounke village, home of the "Blues Man of Mali," the late Ali Parka Toure, the



country's best-known musical export. His former home — rumored to be a museum — was, in reality, a dingy cafe selling a few CDs, the walls decorated with maps of Mali — plus, for some inexplicable reason, a large colored map of Germany and Switzerland.

Mud brick Timbuktu, our river journey's end, was better. We walked by the largest *banco* mosque, the Djingareï Ber, got the official stamp (free) in our passports, avoided the "I've been to Timbuktu" T-shirts, and took a peek around its busy market to which slabs of opaque white salt from the mines a staggering 700km north in the Sahara are still brought by camel. (They tried transporting it by truck but the slabs disintegrated. My question about salt ultimately needing to be ground to a powder drew blank looks.)

The town commemorates the first Western explorers to reach what was then a fabled and remote city of gold. Major Gordon Laing, a Scot, was the first to arrive, in 1826, but was murdered as he left. Others fared better. The houses they stayed in have plaques on the walls.

Four days of trekking, accompanied by local porters to carry our equipment between Dogon villages in the east of Mali, was an incredible but punishing climax. Punishing because midday temperatures of 40°C forced us to confine our walking to early morning and late afternoon. Incredible, not only to see the characteristic, thatched, witches'-hat shaped roofs on the Dogon pepperpot-like granaries but also each village's sole circular house, set aside for menstruating women. And the enormously thick, thatched roofed *toqu nas*, the rectangular meeting places for men, built purposely not high enough to stand in to reduce the chances of argument.

More impressive still, built into ledges on the cliffs above the Dogon villages are the buildings that the locals' predecessors, the pygmy Tellem, used until they left the area or were extirpated around the 14th century. Colored pale terracotta like the cliff, they might be tall, conical or squat ... whatever fits the space. The Dogon believe the Tellem flew up to these vertiginous retreats. A more prosaic explanation is that they made ropes from baobab tree fibers.

But when you wake, as I did, in your tent at the dead of night in a Dogon village, and you hear the rhythmic chants and drum beats marking the death of a villager a few days earlier, his body already lifted up to be stored with others in a cliff cave, it's easy to imagine that there's a little magic in the air.



Mali, the seventh-largest country in Africa, is home to a thriving music scene; the University of Sankore, one of the world's oldest universities; and the Great Mosque of Djenne, the largest mud building anywhere. Clockwise from top: Dogon homes and granaries stand in the village of Begnimato; a loudspeaker is attached to the minaret of the Dyingerey Ber Mosque in Timbuktu; a girl walks past the minaret of the 15th-century Sankore Mosque in Timbuktu; baboon skulls adorn a hunter's home in Begnimato.

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