

## It's Not like You're Going to Timbuktu

When I was college, I remember packing up my things when I visited home. I would check and recheck if I had everything and my ma would say, "Don't worry it's not like you're going to Timbuktu." Going to Timbuktu, Mali, one feels the geographic remoteness and isolation. In traveling through the rest of Mali one also feels the isolation because foreigners are often pestered unmercifully by tourist hawkers.

The options of getting to Timbuktu are flying, a boat or a 4 X 4. Flying is expensive and getting to Timbuktu is supposed to be a challenge. The boat takes three days and there is only one reliable company. Private boats are an option but they might take from three days to a week and are extremely cramped. So I went with a 4 X 4 but it's a tough, dusty twelve hour drive which requires a couple stops for the Muslim passengers to pray or to fix a tire. It usually requires a night under the stars sleeping in or around the vehicle as the 4 X 4 has to wait for the morning ferries to cross the river. It's a bit anti-climatic reaching Timbuktu as the town itself isn't much to see. There is a labyrinth of small streets, a small unimpressive Ethnography Museum, the Berry house (belonging to an early Western explorer) and a couple of mosques but the main one I couldn't visit because a couple of Westerners were caught kissing in it earlier in the year.

What is of more interest is a trip into the desert to the Tuareg villages. The traditionally nomadic Tuareg rebelled unsuccessfully in 1990 and there is still lingering tension in northern Mali. The Tuareg are in Mali, Algeria and Morocco and are attempting to secede and become their own country. It's only a one hour ride by camel to one of the nearest villages, Chanta, which is good because it is brutally hot. The mother and two daughters in this patrilineal society cooked rice and bread and I tried camel milk but I didn't like it. The father, who was also my guide, showed me the area including the well for humans and camels, the food for the camels and we also helped the neighbor's downer cow get up. He also showed me the cuts that his camels had to indicate they were his and how to care for the animals.



The nighttime is enchanting, sleeping on a mat or in the family tent under the full moon and the stars. I vividly remember lying on the mat, watching the stars and seeing the father, his son and one of the father's friends arriving on three separate camels at night. The silhouettes of the three men and the three camels coming over the sand dune gave the impression of the Three Wiseman arriving with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It's peaceful with just goats, camels, large beetles or the family cat to

interrupt sleeping. Actually, what woke me is sand blowing in my face during a sandstorm. The father took me inside the family tent but some sand still got into the tent as there was about a foot between the bottom of the tent and the ground. Sandstorms feel like a blizzard and it's dangerous to get the sand in your eyes so the guide put a turban on me.

Most domestic trips to Timbuktu originate in Mopti. I met an Aussie who was teaching in Tanzania but traveling in Mali. We stayed at Mac's Refugee in Sevare which is a sister city to Mopti but much more relaxing and Mac's is definitely a refugee as he keeps the tourist hawkers away. Mac is a 60 something American but was born in Mali to missionary parents. He has lived here most of his life doing missionary work, training Peace Corp volunteers and interpreting for West Africa Peacekeepers. There were other travelers and it was nice to have a normal conversation, one in which you're not asked for money at the end of it. A Niger River day cruise to see where the Bali and Niger rivers met was an excellent way to get away from the drama except for stopping at the villages that were part of the tour when I again was seen as just a bank, dispensing money.



Another common day trip from Mopti is to Djenne which is famous for its mud mosque and Monday market. The walls of the mosque have to be redone with mud every year before and after the rainy season and one can see the mud being prepared next to the mosques. The mosque topped by ostrich eggs is an amazing structure due to its size and the fact that it is made out of mud although this is common in the area. The market is also quite a sight as there is seemingly everything

available. The town is important for Islamic education as it is pure, 100% Muslim and there are twelve schools to learn the Quran better. On some of the older houses, the number of spires protruding out of the roof indicates the number of people that reside in the house. There are Moroccan style houses and walking around the small streets and getting lost is enjoyable as well. The open sewers flowing down those streets are a turnoff though.

The capital, Bamako, has a solid national museum and overall is an okay place to stay for a couple of days. I stayed at the Catholic Mission and the nuns keep out the hawkers as well as they look into the courtyard. It's calm which is good because travelers get bothered quite a bit.

Bankass is a gateway to Dogon territory and the home to these friendly people. The Dogon have a great way of greeting each other including about 10 questions: how are you? your father? your mother? your trip? etc. The area is physically beautiful as there is an escarpment in which the pygmy and Dogons

used to live. There were caves built in the escarpment that was used for storing food but the residents got tired of carrying food and water up to the caves so now they live on the ground. The main crops grown in the area are peanuts, beans, millets. There is a major problem with crops being washed away when it rains so farmers cut bushes and place them near the edge of the fields to slow water runoff.



My guide and I hiked to the villages of Kani-Kombole', Teli and Ende' over a two day period, spending the most time in Teli. It was hot so it was nice to rest at the villages. In Teli, I slept on the hotel roof under the stars which is common and cheaper than staying in a hotel room. The hotel owners laid a mattress on the roof accessed by a handmade creaky ladder. The mattress has a mosquito net around it and sleeping is comfortable but the goats and donkeys are surprisingly loud and usually serve as a wake up call. Some of the food that is available here including a cat and a baboon that was being skinned in the middle of town. There are also several tourist trinkets to buy. Seemingly ever little kid in the village had items for sale, many made of pure indigo.

Climbing into the escarpment around Teli, one can walk through the elevated villages constructed to escape from slave traders. These mud brick buildings date from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and although the natural overhang protects them somewhat from the elements, many are still falling apart. We heard one house collapse as we walked along the escarpment. The hogon's house is the most important as they are the Dogon spiritual leader. There are paintings of the sun, moon, snakes, horses and sacrificed chickens as well as monkey head skeletons on the hogon house which are all related to their religion. Some of the holes in the caves belong to the pygmy people who were the original inhabitants of the escarpment who were subsequently removed by the Dogon people.

The sites in Mali are great but the constant wanting to sell you something isn't. With all the tourist possibilities, it's somewhat understandable. The mythical Timbuktu is almost a requirement if you're in Mali. The Dogon country is fascinating and once you settle on a guide it is both beautiful and unique. Djenne has the large mud mosque and the Monday market and is also a real highlight.