

The boat to Timbuktu

An oasis on the edge of the Sahara, whose mystique was enhanced by its inaccessibility, Timbuktu was a fabled city that captured the imagination of 19th-century explorers like few other places. Nic Madge went to see what all the fuss was about

Timbuktu was a fabulously wealthy oasis on the edge of the Sahara. It was the destination for caravans of camels that spent weeks crossing the baking desert. It was the meeting place of the Moors, Arabs and Tuaregs of north Africa and the black races of the tropics, where the sands of the Sahara met the blue waters of the mighty River Niger. It was a fabled city where slabs of salt were traded weight for weight with gold and merchants sold slaves and ivory. It was a centre of great learning with 150 Islamic schools and dozens of mosques.

Splendid isolation

Above all, the name Timbuktu was

synonymous with inaccessibility. Its isolation enhanced its mystique. In 1620, the English explorer Richard Jobson, who only reached the River Gambia, wrote that the roofs of Timbuktu's houses were covered with plates of gold, the bottoms of the rivers glistened with precious metals, and the mountains had only to be excavated to yield a profusion of metallic treasure. Leo the African, who was born in late fifteenth century Granada and crossed the Sahara by camel, described the magnificence of the Timbuktu's royal court, the wealth of its traders, the numerous shops of merchants and artisans and the many hand-written books on sale. In 1824 the Société Géographique de Paris offered a prize of 10,000 francs to the first explorer to reach Timbuktu, although a non-Muslim had probably already, albeit unwillingly, visited the city. Robert Adams, an illiterate American sailor, was shipwrecked off Mauritania and sold into slavery. After being taken to Timbuktu for some months in 1811, he escaped and made his way to Morocco, but his description was so dreary that many disbelieved him. Mungo Park passed by on the Niger, but was not allowed to enter the city. A Scottish army major, Gordon Laing, reached Timbuktu in 1826, but was hacked to death soon after leaving. The prize was destined for René Caille, a Frenchman, who spent two weeks in Timbuktu in 1828 disguised as an Egyptian.

'The Mosques, topped with minarets shaped like beehives'

flights to Timbuktu on the computer. Another western source emailed to say that Air Mali's planes were not flying due to a fuel shortage. When we made enquiries at Air Mali's head office in Bamako, we were told that there were flights, but that all the seats were sold. A local travel agent said that Air Mali were liars. A second local travel agent said to come back at three o'clock and he would sort things out. Finally, we were told that Air Mali were looking for a Fokker. If they found a Fokker, there would be a flight, but if not, 'No Fokker. No Flight.' There are though boats to Timbuktu. So we decided that we would cruise down the Niger from Mopti, Mali's main river port. But Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, less developed than rural India, and even getting to Mopti, 600km, along the country's main road, was not the simple task that we had imagined. We bought a bus ticket and waited at Bamako's Gare Routiere, absorbed by the

hawkers – orange sellers, men offering ADIBAS children's ware with PHILIBS, SUNNY AND NAIWA radios round their necks, children plying polythene bags of drinking water and young men carrying wooden boards with a small hospital's range of pharmaceutical drugs. Six hours later, we were still waiting. There had been a phone call. A group of passengers was on its way. The bus would leave when they turned up. But when a large extended family, who were moving house, arrived, their furniture would not fit on the roof of the bus, or its replacement – the three piece suite was just too large. So we gave up and bought tickets from a different company the next day. In Mopti, we made straight for the quay. When the river is high enough, the Compagnie Malienne de Navigation runs weekly steamers to Timbuktu and Gao. We saw their white metal steamer, Tombouctou, with its three decks and first class cabins, berthed at Mopti, but she would not leave for several days.

Other ideas

Anyway, we had other ideas. Further along the quay we found the pinasses, wooden cargo boats that ply the Niger, carrying all the goods that the otherwise inaccessible towns downstream require. There was a pinasse fully laden with sacks of flour, millet, rice and ground nuts, which, we were told,

A difficult journey

Travel to Timbuktu is still not easy. There is no road but, in theory anyway, there are weekly flights from Mali's capital Bamako to Timbuktu's new Saudi built airport. Our London travel agent, who specialised in African travel, could find no



was leaving 'tout de suite' – we correctly interpreted that as meaning some time later in the day. After some fairly desultory bargaining, we secured a small section near the bow, about five feet by four feet, all to ourselves. We stretched out across three sacks of flour each – not just one sack of hard knobby ground nuts, like

villages on the opposite bank. Two boys struggled to lift a motorbike from a pirogue on to the roof of a pinasse. Upstream, near the Bar de Bozo and the fish market, women washed clothes in the river and boys soaped goats, before loading them, freshly washed and milky

'The beautiful sunsets, with the glorious salmon pinks of an eastern sky'

those who had bargained harder and who found themselves nearer the engine. We even enjoyed a measure of privacy, in a valley between oil barrels and the other passengers' baggage piled high behind us. Food was included in the price we paid, but I set off round the market with one of the young crew members to stock up with provisions – it seemed an essential preparation for a long voyage. I bought French 'pain' at the bread stall, a dozen green oranges from a young girl, tinned sardines from the grocer and bottles of mineral water from the drinks depot on the quay.

On board our pinasse, some 40 other passengers sat on their sacks, ate, talked and played their ghetto blasters. The boat was perhaps 100 feet long, shaped like the carcass of a great whale, with supports of young tree trunks bent into circular ribs, covered by a roof of bamboo and coconut matting, all strengthened by roughly hewn tree trunks.

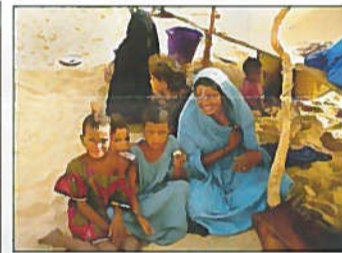
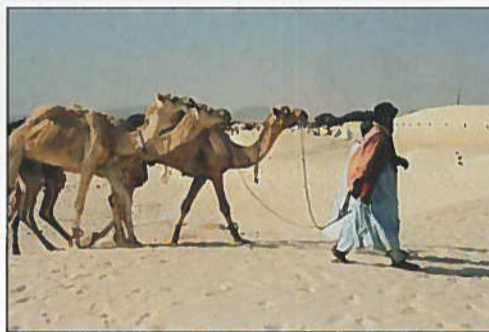
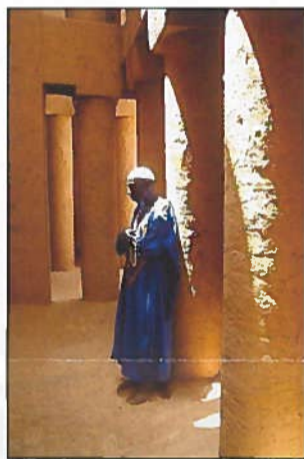
Towards the stern, there were just two unladen parts of the boat, with the motor and a galley area where women lit wood fires and cooked. Next to them, a man worked continuously with empty cooking oil containers, baling out the water that seeped into the bottom of the boat.

Weighing anchor

We lay back, waiting for the pinasse to weigh anchor, and watched the activity of the port. The harbour was lined with traders, their wares displayed on makeshift wooden stalls, or simply laid out on the dusty red earth – grey slabs of salt cut like marble which had been brought across the Sahara by camel caravan, fuel oil in glass bottles with rag stoppers like Molotov cocktails, mountains of fresh and dried fish, partially constructed wooden beds, long steel rods, motorbike parts, as well as the staples, flour, rice, millet and ground nuts.

All were bought and sold and then loaded on to pirogues, smaller wooden boats that were punted or paddled to the islands in the Niger delta, or

white, on to a pirogue. We started downstream just after sunset and continued in darkness through the night. The pinasse was navigated without the aid of lights, either on the boat, or on the shore. Dimly, we could see the blackness of the banks far away on either side and the slightly lighter shade of grey of the river. By dawn, we were in the middle of a large lake, the Lac Debo. The helmsman sat silhouetted against the light pinks of the eastern



wheel in the bow, connected by external chains to a rudder at the stern. He had no direct control over the rear motor, but by pulling one of two lengths of green string attached to bells, he could send signals to the 'engine room'. We continued down river for two days, past villages of square mud brick houses, the colour of *café au*

grazed on the banks but, as we approached Timbuktu, the land became drier and the herds were replaced by termite mounds and sand dunes. For two days, we saw no bridges and no cars. The site of a motorbike in a village was a rarity to be remarked upon.

The main artery

The Niger is the main artery in this part of Mali, but even so, there was little other river traffic. Men and boys fished, casting their fine nets into the river, or punted along unseen channels, their pirogues hidden in the reeds, the vertical boatmen and their punting poles standing out against the sky. There were a few wooden boats with sails of sackcloth, or black plastic, slowly making their way upstream, against the current.

The pinasse had its own routine. Men prayed together, several times a day. The boat did not stop – they simply knelt in lines, on sacks towards the bow. Whichever way the boat was pointing, they always faced the front, irrespective of whether that was the direction of Mecca.

Food was served three times a day. Women collected a cup full of rice from each passenger and then cooked it with freshly caught fish, and a spicy tomato sauce. We ate with our fingers from a large metal bowl that we shared with the crew – and we enjoyed watermelon parties each afternoon with a couple of young American Peace Corp volunteers. The pinasse did not dock between Mopti and Timbuktu. If passengers wanted to disembark, they climbed into one of the pirogues tied to the pinasse. The crew punted to the shore and the passengers leaped on to the bank, with their baggage thrown after them. One passenger, wearing purple robes, was met, apparently in the middle of nowhere, by a boy on a camel.

Disappointment

At sunset on the second day, we reached Karioume, Timbuktu's port. We clambered into a battered Land Rover and were driven along dykes lined with eucalyptus trees to Timbuktu just as dark was falling. And Timbuktu? Some are disappointed by what they find. In 1828, René Caillie wrote, 'Everything was enveloped in a great sadness. I was amazed by the lack of energy, by the inertia that hung over the town.'

sky and the silver of the water, huddled against the breeze and spray. He steered by a brass ship's

lait, and mosques capped with minarets shaped like beehives. At first, cows and goats





Baba boasts thousands of family chronicles, dating back centuries, charting the history of the region. And finally there is Heinrich Barth's house – not a grand museum but a small room in a house where this German explorer lived for six months in 1853 and, in Arabic, debated the Koran with his host Sheikh al-Baqqai. As the searing temperatures begin to fall in the late afternoon and a soft yellow light gives way to a fluorescent salmon sunset, people



resplendent in yellow satin sits next to her bread oven, waiting to sell her few remaining loaves. Across the way, youths play a serious, skilful game of football with a mix of trainers and bare feet, on a sandy pitch without a blade of grass, avoiding donkeys, goats and motorbikes. And yes, with a little imagination, it is possible to see and feel the glory of past ages. ■



come out of their houses to sit in the streets. The town assumes a relaxed, slow and easy air. Outside the Sankore Mosque, a man fills green plastic kettles with water, ready for the evening worshippers to perform their ablutions. A woman

Did you know...
 ...that Timbuktu is on the edge of the Sahara desert? People often talk about Timbuktu as some vague, legendary place a long way away without actually knowing where it is.
 ...that the Societe Geographique de Paris offered a prize of 10,000 francs in 1824 to the first explorer to reach Timbuktu.

Now its narrow sandy streets, with crumbling mud brick houses, show no immediate sign of its former wealth. The tentes of the nomadic Bella or Fula people, no more than branches covered with coconut matting, pitched on the sites of collapsed houses, are certainly not roofed with gold. Goats wander in the main square and the merchants of the rather inaptly named 'grande marchée' sell little more than small onions, piles of clothes, fire wood and charcoal.

The days when 60,000 camels arrived in caravans each year have long gone. The only transport to be found at the gare routière is a clutch of half a dozen battered Land Rovers. Sand blows in from the dunes that surround the town. Its museum is just as dusty as the streets, with a collection comprising a few Neolithic stones, some clay pots and some old photos.

Glory of past ages

But on a closer look, it is possible to imagine this great trading city in its prime. The Tuaregs, the blue men of the desert, with magnificent indigo robes and black turbans, tall and statuesque in their bearing, belong to a grander heritage. In the side streets, there are the sturdily built stone houses of merchants, the heavy wooden doors with metal decorations hiding shady courtyards. The Djingareiber Mosque, built by an Andalusian architect, dates back to the 14th century. Although built of mud brick, with wooden supports jutting out horizontally, it is large and solid, its roof supported by some two hundred columns. The Centre des Recherches Historiques Ahmed



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