The Quest for Timbuktu

New Renaissance's Daniel Haven goes on a modern day safari to Timbuktu, in Mali.
By Daniel Haven

A trip to the legendary city of saints.

{mosgoogle}Timbuktu, along with Outer Mongolia and Boro-Boro, often denotes the most faraway place on Earth. But where is Timbuktu? For me it was an unknown place of mystery and wonder, much like Atlantis or Shangri-La. Only a few years ago I learned that Timbuktu is a tiny desert town in Mali, North Africa.

With Gisele, my Burkinabe friend, I arrived in Mali’s capital, Bamako, from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso early on December 28. The city was carpeted with discarded plastic bags, in contrast to Ouagadougou, the cleanest city I have seen in West Africa. Is it worse than Lagos? Bamako is more authentic and feels more real than Lagos. Lagos covers up its innards with its massive concrete structures, while Bamako is small and naked in its squalor.

After two days, we were ready to go to Timbuktu. Everyone was enthusiastic about ‘Tombouctou 'la mystérieuse’--it’s beautiful! Historic! The roads are good, no problem!' Malians take pride in Timbuktu, but I noticed none had actually been there. I still figured we could go there in one day, spend two days seeing it, then come back quickly. Well...

We found ourselves at four in the morning in the house of a friend of the sister of a friend of Gisele’s brother, climbing into a Toyota pick-up. The driver worked on development projects near Timbuktu. He offered us a free ride. I rode in the back along with nine turbaned Tuareg nomads who smoked continuously. I was glad we were in the open pick-up and not a closed bus. We expected to reach Timbuktu the same evening.

After a few hours the truck left the paved road and started through the bush. Vegetation became scarcer as we moved north across the savannah towards the Sahara. In the afternoon we crossed the great Niger River. At times, flocks of tiny squeaking birds followed the truck, much as seagulls follow ships. As the sun set, my comrade Tuaregs pulled out a rifle for security; bandits have ravaged and plundered in the desert since historical times.

The pale sand dunes turned a luminous rusty red in the sunset. As darkness fell, a distinct crescent moon rose high in the southern sky along with a single bright star. The beauty inspired a feeling of sacred presence, as if I was suspended in the heart of Islam. God is Great, I thought, and savoured the moment, oblivious to the discomforts of the rumbling, crowded pick-up.

In the roadless bush the desert looks the same everywhere. We hadn’t met another car for hours. Our driver was lost, so like sailors of yore, my Tuareg comrades navigated by the stars, and around 10 pm we arrived... not at Timbuktu but at Léré.

We registered at the Léré police check post, then all slept in a big comfortable room in the house of our driver’s cousin. As we lay down on the mats, one brother jumped, having stepped on a frog. Frogs in the desert? I was surprised, but I slept very well that first night on the road to Timbuktu.

The next morning I dug out my new turban, and with some help was able to tie it Tuareg style. It covers your neck, mouth and nose, runs around your head and hangs down like a scarf, protecting you from the dust of the road, from cold at night and from the sun during the day. But I was already badly sunburnt from the first long day in the back of the pick-up.

As the desert looks the same everywhere, so with Léré. We were lost three times in just a few hours, but the sky was bigger and bluer than I can remember and the timeless feeling of Léré charmed me. I took a picture of a five-year-old kid in a Tupac Shakur t-shirt.

Our friend from Bamako found us another truck for Timbuktu. He gave us a big water bottle and said he hoped we did not mind just a little gasoline mixed in with the water. We reassured him very politely, and drank gasoline water for the next two days.

The new Tuaregs were less friendly, apart from a smiling old man who spoke English; very rare in this Francophone country. The truck was packed so high, that I had to hold on tight. Positioned on the side, I had to pull my legs in every time we passed too close to the desert bushes; I learned the hard way about their nasty thorns.

Around 10.30 pm, the truck stopped at a nomad campfire, where we spent the night. Our hosts passed around a calabash of fresh milk, warm and sweet. Beyond the fire I could hear the chorus of mooing from a large number of cows. The nomads gave us each a mat and invited us to go close to the fire. Only a few of the men appeared to remember that it was New Year’s Eve. Most of them slept, while others started dinner preparations. A goat was

slaughtered, and a big pot was put on the fire. I tried to sleep, but opened my eyes just as they threw in the goat’s head, horns and eyes and all, with only the skin peeled off. I immediately remembered 'Goat’s Head Soup', maybe the last Rolling Stones album I actually listened to.

Around 30 minutes past midnight the soup was ready, and everything became merry. We politely declined our share, without getting deeply into the philosophy of vegetarianism. One friendly Tuareg showed me how to wrap the straw mat around me. Thanks to this tip, I miraculously survived the freezing night without becoming sick. I slept lightly, dreaming of Islam, the crescent moon, cows, the Rolling Stones. It was a New Year’s Eve I will never forget.

That morning I got a particularly uncomfortable ‘seat’, where a bloody carved goat’s leg left over from the previous night hit me at every frequent bump in the road. Mid-morning, we reached Goundam. After some unpleasant bargaining we finally got another pickup to Timbuktu. Previously, we had travelled in new Toyota Landcruisers, but this old wreck of a Renault had its own crew; a Tuareg driver of the turbanless wannabe-playboy variety, and three black mechanics in their early teens. Before we left Goundam, they had already changed two tyres and done a dozen engine repairs. Our fellow passengers were grumbling impatiently, but in the desert, you take what transport you can get.

We finally reached Timbuktu around 5 that evening, sixty hours after we left Bamako. But to avoid the police post and a fine for having no licence, our truck had taken a shortcut and got stuck in a sand trap on the outskirts of town. We all joined in, flattening bushes under the wheels for traction and pushing the pickup through the deep sand until we reached paved roads.

We had a name and a letter from our first driver. The first person we asked sent us to the compound of the Hamahadu’s. We were offered seats in the courtyard, as Mouhammed, the youngest son, about 15, prepared tea for us. The Tuaregs take a particular delight in lengthy rituals of preparing tea. They insist on using only tiny blue teapots. The tea is poured in great long swooping motions between the pot and glasses. It may take 15 minutes to prepare three or four very tiny glasses of tea. One is supposed to sip for a few minutes, but it’s hardly even half a mouthful, and the tea isn’t really hot any more. Several times in the desert I saw young men absorbed in this tea ritual for hours on end, lost as if in trance.

The only spectacular place to visit in Timbuktu is the Djinguareyber Mosque, built in the 14th century. Every Friday the whole of Timbuktu gathers there for prayer. The architecture is simple but impressive, and the guide told us stories of the numerous Muslim saints buried within the compound. At least 333 Muslim saints died in Timbuktu. It was the first time I had heard about Muslim saints. Like Catholic and Hindu saints, they live piously, some mystical, divine things happen, and after they die they somehow attain the power to perform miracles, healing of the sick being most popular. We heard of many miracles performed by the most famous saints of the Djinguareyber Mosque, the Brothers Hassan and Hussein, who devoted their time exclusively to reading the Koran. The mosque had many fascinating stories, like the one about a foreign pilgrim who after a long time was granted admission and then one day was seen riding out of a back door on a huge lion. Since then that door has been sealed. High up in the southern wall of the mosque, a star and crescent window is positioned in exactly the right place astronomically. I got a holy feeling looking at that window, even though it was 10 am at the time of our visit and no moon was visible.

Timbuktu is named after Bouctou, an old woman who used to help everybody. In the museum, I was able to see the supposed well (now dry) of the original Bouctou, who gave water to all from it. The town was founded by the Tuaregs in the 11th century, and was at the height of its cultural and economic importance in the 15th and 16th centuries. It attracted many Muslim scholars and intellectuals. Now it’s just a tiny town in the desert, population less than 15,000, the sandy streets often deserted. Tuaregs still dominate the city. The men look impressive with their turbans and magnificent robes, but the women don’t move about much. The men cover their faces, for practical rather than religious reasons, while the women are unveiled. The Tuaregs follow a matrilineal system of inheritance.

In the afternoon of our first day, many musicians and singers arrived at the Hamahadu family compound. They were singing and playing their instruments, while a couple of older men performed the enchanting sitting dance of the Tuaregs. The men folded their turbans to cover their faces completely, and remaining sitting cross-legged, moved with the music. The movements were proud and graceful, majestic and mystical... pulling at the turban and the robes, sometimes pulling out a sword, sometimes turning suddenly to strike a pose. The music was played on two Tuareg guitars. The singers sound almost Arabian as they stretch and bend the notes; often they come to a short halt with a loud "hey!" It appeared that the musicians and singers followed the dancer as much as the dancer followed the music. This dance is really impossible to describe in words, but it touched me deeply and I feel very lucky to have seen it.

That evening we went for the compulsory tourist camel ride in the desert. Sitting on the top of a camel is a great feeling, they move more like a boat than a horse. The view is like that from a double-decker bus, and it’s the best way to visit the great sand dunes around Timbuktu.

Our second day coincided with a visit from Mali’s prime minister and minister of tourism. The central square was lined with thousands of people, listening to musicians who played through small amplifiers. The spirit was high and we saw dancers from many different tribes and ethnic groups of the desert, showing off their best moves.

When we started to look for our return transport we found out that it’s even harder to get out of Timbuktu than to get to it. The earliest we could find was a bus five days away. But we were already supposed to have been back in Bamako.

The desert people cannot relate to time pressures and schedules; their lives are not programmed. When we explained, "we were in a hurry, didn’t have more time and just had to leave", the Tuaregs couldn’t comprehend and became impatient. Oh! I thought, it would be great to be liberated from the bondage of clock and calendar like the desert dwellers!

Still, our restless minds conditioned by modern living told us we had to leave. Besides our schedules, we were getting tired of eating food full of sand. The Tuaregs seemed unable to digest food if it does not have a few fistfuls of sand mixed in; the rice, the stew, even the bread and a glass of milk, everything had sand in it.

Our saving grace was the arrival of our Tuareg friend who had left us in Léré. He said he could take us to Gossi. So on the evening of January 4th, we left, travelling with a band of musicians, who played and sang as we sped through the desert. Around 2.30 a.m. we stopped in a desert camp and slept for a few hours.

We reached the banks of the Niger River in the morning. There we had breakfast and waited for the arrival of the ministers. When they arrived our musicians had changed into their best robes and were serenading as the ministers’ Landcruiser mounted the ferry to take them across the Niger.

The landscape at the banks of Niger is unique, the sand dunes reaching all the way to the water. The 30-minute crossing was pleasant and smooth. But the ‘traffic’ here is really no traffic at all, with just a few vehicles passing daily.

At noon we stopped for lunch at a lake in the middle of the dunes, with hundreds of cows and goats and dozens of camels drinking. The place had a peaceful and old feeling, and I felt as if in a fairy tale from the Arabian Nights.

By six in the evening the Toyota left us by the police check post at Gossi. Our onward journey to Bamako was unclear. We decided to wait, hoping someone would come along to give us a ride. After 9 pm a big semi-trailer came, with space for us up front. We believed in God again. Minutes before we had been looking at another freezing night in the desert, on the hard bench outside the police check post.

At midnight we passed by Les Mains de Fatima, huge natural columns of rock, big as mountains, that protrude out of the landscape like branchless tree trunks. They defy description, and seeing them in full moonlight was truly mystical.

By early morning, we reached Mopti, the river city, and caught the first bus for Bamako. For the first time on our trip, we both had seats and were travelling in comfort. We reached Bamako at five in the evening. It was like a cruel awakening from a deep dream. Back in the real world, our minds were still buzzing from the mysteries of Timbuktu and the timeless beauty of the desert.

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