

Tea with the Tuaregs in Timbuktu

In late 2006, Eliza Reid travelled alone through seven West African countries. At the end of part one of her travelogue, she was in a small Malian town suffering from a high fever and all the symptoms of malaria.



Busy: *The whole family has a job to do. In Bandiagara, the "gate-way" town to Dogon Country, this girl is pounding millet into flour with a giant mortar and pestle. Her mother is also preparing food.*

According to his prescription slips, Dr. Zoumana Traoré studied medicine in Germany. The fine featured man was fluent in German, French, Bambara, and probably other local languages.

Dr. Traoré arrived in a deep purple kaftan with a medical bag in his hand only 15 minutes after the owners of the guesthouse where I was staying in Mali placed a call to him.

I described my ailments: the chills, the headaches, the malaise, and the high fever. They were textbook symptoms of malaria.

Malaria can be diagnosed with a blood test. The test takes one hour at a local clinic which is open on weekdays. It was Saturday night.

Dr. Traoré informed me that if I had malaria, it would be too risky to wait until Monday to diagnose it. Rather, I should begin a course of anti-malarial treatment immediately. If I had the illness, the drugs would cure it. If I did not, they wouldn't harm me.

Dr. Traoré's emergency visit to my hotel room cost 10,000 CFA (ISK 1300). The medication cost 8,000 CFA (ISK 1000). In Mali, over 72% of the population lives on less than \$1 a day. For me, treatment of malaria was a simple procedure which showed results within 24 hours. For people who can't afford the medication, malaria claims more than one million lives annually; almost 90% of these cases occur in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The medication I took made me feel all better, but I'll never know with certainty if I really had malaria. Nevertheless, I was soon ready to resume my adventure.

CLIFF WALKING WITH THE DOGON

The UNESCO-listed Dogon Country is the most visited region of Mali. It's a 250-kilometre long escarpment near the border with Burkina Faso which has been home to the Dogon people

since the 14th century. The Dogon speak their own language and are primarily animist. Their relative isolation in small villages mostly at the bottom of the cliff, has ensured that their culture and traditions have remained fairly unchanged over the centuries.

Tourists visit Dogon Country to get a glimpse of this culture and also to hike amidst the spectacular scenery. The Dogon villages are dotted about four to five kilometres apart at the base of the escarpment (only a cluster of trading towns are at the top of the cliff).

With the escort of a cheerful 30-year-old guide named Barou, and fully recovered from my bout of illness, I embarked on a four-day hike from Nombori village to Ireli village, sleeping on the rooftops of huts at night and gazing at the stars. There is no electricity or running water in the villages so the cosmic viewing was incomparable.



The Wall: Most of the buildings in Bandiagara, on the edge of Dogon Country, have an outer layer of mud or plain cement which needs to be repaired at the end of each yearly rainy season. Children are sometimes dressed in clothes which have been donated by western aid organisations.

The routine of the hike was a welcome break from the chaos of taking public transport and wandering through hectic cities.

I would wake up with the sun, stirred into consciousness by a gradual symphony of sounds. First came the constant throbbing of the crickets and other insects. Then the other animals contributed: the sharp insistent crow of the rooster, the bleating of sheep, and the occasional bray of a donkey. This would be followed by the laughter of children and babies crying.

Just before the sun peeked above the horizon, the call to prayer at the mud-built mosque, delivered by a person rather than a recording, echoed across each town. The final element of percussion was provided by the women who started to pound rhythmically the millet in huge mortar and pestles, trying to complete the most difficult work before it became too hot.

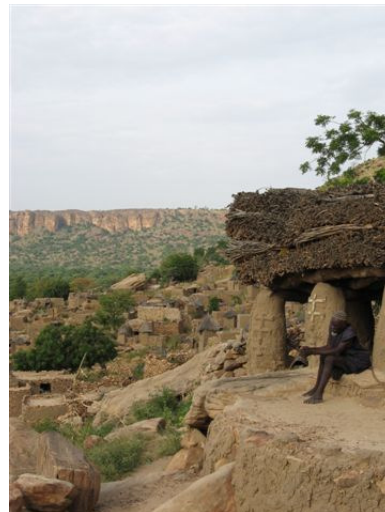
It was a diligent, but not a loud, awakening, and by 5:30am every day I was up and ready to go.

After a sugary Nescafé and powdered milk with baguette for breakfast, Barou and I would walk to the next village along the base of the escarpment, chatting about our childhoods and tourism in Mali, or just in silence watching the orange glow shining off the 200-300 metre cliff to our left.

Every few minutes or so, our walk would be interrupted with a cheerful "Aga po!"; the first entry in a round of Dogon greetings. Every person we encountered on the path had the same ritual: Hello? How are you? How is your family? How is your health? After a rhythmic "séó" ("fine") in response, the questioning was reversed. Like the rest of West Africa, greetings were immensely important.



Star Gazing: I spent my first night in Dogon Country in the chief's compound in the village of Nombori. The photo is taken from the roof where I slept, gazing at the stars and the sharp silhouette of the escarpment on the horizon. Another mattress and mosquito net are in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture, the typical sleeping arrangement for this part of the trip.



Meeting Place: This man is sitting under a toguna, a special building from Dogon Country in which the men of the village meet to resolve disputes and discuss village issues. The straw roof is deliberately built low so that people need to bend over when entering – thus, it is said, preventing them from approaching each other in an angry or confrontational position.

Children, of which, with an average birth rate of over seven babies per woman in Mali, there were many, had their own greeting. It often involved an outstretched hand and a request for something: "Madame, *bonbon?*" "Madame, *Bic?*" "Madame, *cadeau?*"



Follow Me: My guide to Dogon Country, Barou, leads the way in the late afternoon sun. He is wearing a traditional Dogon hat – when he turns his head back and forth, the tassles swat away any surrounding flies. A porter has run ahead of us, carrying my backpack and all the food we will require on the journey.

Barou and I would stop for lunch of rice or couscous at about 10am and rest under palm canopies while the sun got too hot. By 3 or 4pm it was cool enough again to walk to the next village in time for sunset.

At night the stars were so clear I could see the murkiness of the Milky Way and the sharp silhouette of the escarpment. I always hoped for a breeze – even without the sun's glare it was hot and difficult to sleep.

Walking up and down the escarpment itself was far more challenging than the flat hiking at the bottom. I was sweaty and panting after scrambling up boulders to reach the top, gripping my camera and wide-brimmed hat. After one particularly challenging section, I reached the crest of a hill and watched a woman my age gracefully pass me with a baby strapped to her back and about 50 kg of millet in a pottery jug balanced on her head.

The mystery of and admiration for how people managed to carry so much, in such heat, probably living without access to running water, and look so effortlessly graceful remained with me throughout the trip.

THE FORBIDDEN CITY

Dogon Country may be Mali's most visited region for tourists, but it is another location which bears legendary status as one of the world's most remote regions: Timbuktu.

The town, which was a major stop on the ancient trading routes of the Sahara Desert and home of 150 Islamic schools in the 16th century, has had mythical status in the west for centuries. In the 19th century, numerous European explorers, lured by legends of gold-lined streets, tried to reach the sandy town which had long since past its glory days. Gordon Laing was the first to reach it conclusively in 1826, but he was killed by the Sultan's aides on his return.

Nowadays it is possible to fly to Timbuktu, take an air-conditioned 4x4 tour of the town, drink tea with Tuareg nomads in the desert in a pre-arranged encounter, and hasten back to Bamako all in one day.

But that's not the romantic way to reach a city whose very name commands that there should be at least some difficulty in the journey.

There are two other options from the city of Mopti on the banks of the Niger River: a one-day 4x4 journey through scenery reminiscent of the American southwest, which is quick (only about 10 hours) but dangerous if the car gets a flat tire or breaks down in the desert, or a three-day meander along the Niger River in a *pinasse* or covered boat, camping at night in small villages and watching hippos laze by the river bank.

As is so often the case for a solo traveller on a budget, practicalities played a major role in my decision. Along with a couple from my hometown of Ottawa whom I met at an internet café, I hired a 4x4 to take us the 550 km journey to the fabled city. We would return by inexpensive pinasse and watch the hippos.

The journey was much prettier than I had anticipated. As we bumped along the sandy tracks – road is too generous a term – to music by Malian singer Djeneba Seck, the plains got sandier and sandier and we caught glimpses of dromedary camels being herded by Tuareg shepherds in azure turbans.

It was dark by the time we drove over the narrow, sandy (and therefore scary) spit to the point on the Niger River where we were to catch the car ferry across. While waiting, we dined in the dark on tinned sardines and peanuts so fresh (they're one of Mali's biggest exports) they tasted like peas. When the ferry boat arrived after one hour, it had a tiny headlight not bigger than my torch which was used to steer it across Africa's third largest river. Our jeep's parking brake was the only thing stopping us from rolling backwards into the aquatic blackness.

The day we had in Timbuktu was possibly the best one we could have chosen – it was the Eid al-Fitr festival commemorating the end of Ramadan and one of the biggest holidays of the Islamic calendar. Everyone roamed the sand-filled streets dressed in their finest colourful turbans and kaftans. Even little girls had makeup and high heels on. Happily, it also meant we were left virtually undisturbed by the touts who are legendary for clinging to tourists during their stay.



There are tiny museums and middle-sized mosques to visit in Timbuktu, but the attraction of this baking city was just being in such a legendary place. It was not beautiful; the roads were made of sand, black plastic garbage bags blew across them, and open drains made us watch where we were walking. All the low-level homes were made of sandy brick. In a true sign of the end of Timbuktu's isolation, I sent emails home from the local cybercafé.

Merchandise: Dressed in their finest for the Eid al-Fitr festival, three Tuareg nomads display their homemade handicrafts over tea in Timbuktu. On offer are silver and brass bracelets, carved daggers and necklaces. (The man on the left wears a traditional leather wallet around his neck – also for sale, of course).

After a restful day on the fringe of the Sahara, we were ready to leave. But this was Timbuktu, and nothing would be easy: Our pre-booked pinasse and driver finally showed up at 4pm on the scheduled day of departure, effectively ensuring that we would not be able to leave for another day. Then he demanded twice the pre-agreed price, claiming he needed "extra fuel".

I had heard excuses like that before. In some ways, who could blame him to trying to get a little extra money from wealthy tourists. But to demand double the original price was more money than any of us had.

We argued and debated but he wouldn't budge. And neither would I. So we had to abandon the romantic option of leaving Timbuktu.

A search ensued to find alternative transport back to Mopti and, after several hours of protracted negotiations, we located a 4x4 driver who would return us the next morning. After two flat tires on route, we finally escaped to Mopti, complete with official Bureau of Tourism stamps in our passports to prove we had indeed set foot in "the Forbidden City".

SOUVENIR HUNTING

Bargaining in West Africa, as in many other parts of the world, is a challenge for the energetic. Merchants have a sixth sense for indecision and if you are not in top form when making a purchase, you'll be exploited more than you'd like.

I had been getting into shape for this sport with purchases in Dakar and from Tuaregs in Timbuktu, but in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, I had a bigger challenge: a tailored shirt for my husband.

I had arrived in Bobo from Mali late the night before, after a predictably delayed but otherwise uneventful bus journey across the border. Bobo is Burkina's second city after the capital Ouagadougou, and is known as the more laid back of the two. It's a popular spot for overland travellers to relax and recharge for a few days.

Or for them to buy souvenirs. I started (and finished; it was too exhausting to go elsewhere) at the typically bustling central market in the middle of town. Touts swarmed to me, an obvious visitor, the instant I walked through the gates.

I knew I wanted to buy some clothing for my husband. The first step was tracking down the right material from the mountains of cotton and cotton-blend fabrics on offer. Almost all were in bright colours with garish patterns on them. I found a deep yellow material spangled with azure fish, perfect for the man from Iceland.

A price needed to be negotiated. I knew how the routine worked. They would quote me a figure. I would fake outrage and quote something about one quarter of that. "Ah, Madame, please," they would exclaim. "My family needs to be fed. And look at the quality of this material. You must offer me real price." And the debate would continue until middle ground was reached.



Eye for Detail A tailor in Bobo-Dioulasso's central market lovingly prepares a bright new African shirt for my husband back home.

I repeated the procedure when I chose a tailor to transform the fabric into a piece of haute couture. **I tried to remember to check all the places where hidden charges could be snuck in: were buttons included in the price? Would it be ready in the morning – or two days later?**

The whole bargaining process for the shirt took about 90 minutes, and it was pressed and ready the next morning when I went to collect it in the middle of the maze of alleys that made up the market.

Souvenir in backpack, it was time to move on from Bobo. The journey to Ouagadougou (pronounced Wagadúgú) normally takes about five hours. The existence of several competing bus companies meant services have increased to lure customers; for the first time on my journey, I was in a bus with air conditioning.

The company STMB's slogan was "le professionnel". The back of the bus had a dangling flap under the bumper proclaiming "vive la fraternité et l'amour" (long live brotherhood and love).

One hour after we left, with Canadian band Great Big Sea's cover of "It's the End of the World as we Know It" being piped into my ears by my MP3 player, the bus drove deep into mud grooves caused by the last dregs of the rainy season.

The bus was stuck fast and, thanks to the speed at which it had approached the track, very nearly tipped over.

Leaning at a dangerously precarious angle to the left, we all clambered off to braise in the mid-day sun. A crowd gathered from a nearby village to stare. I hunkered down under a lonely tree for the long haul. After all, who knew how many hours it would be before we left again?

END.

Eliza Reid travelled alone through seven countries in West Africa last October and November. This is the second part of her story, which will continue in the next three Sundays of the newspaper.

WEST AFRICA

Mali

Population: 11.7 million

Capital: Bamako

Official Language: French, although a large majority have Bambara as their first language

Religion: Muslim (90%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 49 years

Did You Know? Although Timbúktú may be Mali's most famous location, most people don't know that this landlocked country is its home. Every January, a desert oasis near the town plays host to Festival in the Desert, an internationally-renowned musical celebration featuring some of Mali's best musical gems. The country, like most of West Africa, is famed for its musical traditions and local musicians like the late Ali Farka Touré, Salif Keita, and the blind duo Amadou and Mariam Bagayogo have acquired a global following.

Burkina Faso

Population: 13.9 million

Capital: Ouagadougou

Official Language: French, although various native African languages are spoken by the vast majority

Religion: Muslim (50%), Indigenous beliefs (40%), Christian (10%)

Life Expectancy at birth: 48.85 years

"Burkina Faso" means "land of the honourable". Few tourists visit the country, unless as part of an overland tour, but it has much to offer visitors. The lush southern part of the country has beautiful waterfalls, while the dry reaches of the north provide glimpses into the way of life of traders who live in the Sahara.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT – SEVEN HOURS IN MALI

The Ségou "*gare routière*" (bus station) is milling with people. I arrive at 7am, buy a baguette with fried bananas and freshly grilled brochettes of beef, then make my way to the ticket booth to purchase the 5500 CFA (ISK 730) one-way ticket to Sevaré, 350 km away.

I chat to the driver and the other bus employee on the trip, in case I need their help later on. One passenger offers to send 60 camels to my husband in Reykjavík in exchange for me staying with him; I scoff and he raises the offer to 80.

This bus is typical of most: the front windscreen is cracked in several places and an A3 sized poster of Amadou Toumani Touré, Mali's President, is taped to the right-hand side, adding a further obstacle to the driver's field of vision. West African pop music blasts from the speakers.

My small talk with the staff pays off and they assign me an aisle seat in the middle of the bus (safest) and by one of the small "sunroofs" – the windows don't open, so the main door and the sun roofs are kept open to provide a small amount of respite from the heat. The colour scheme of the bus is based on a palette of "dirt" with "dust" accents.

The aisles are full of sacks of onions and bottles of local beer. The kaftan-wearing man across the aisle from me is muttering quietly to himself with his prayer beads. Does he know something I don't?

The 9am bus to Sevaré leaves promptly at 9:50am, tumbling east along Mali's main tarmac road, the driver honking frantically to announce when we are about to overtake a slower van with people on the roof or a donkey and cart.

I have a good view of the driver in his tie-died shirt from the rear-view mirror. I can see when he picks his nose and his ears and when he yawns and rubs his eyes. I can see when he leans forward to pick something up off the floor or turns around to talk to his friends.

We stop at most of the villages along the way, usually small communities with mud houses and a mud mosque. Women and children clamber onto the bus to sell their wares – everything from sunglasses to sacks of unfiltered water to oily clumps of dough or fresh peanuts. I buy some dough balls and give a couple to a little boy sitting near me. He smiles shyly and accepts.

The landscape is dusty, like seemingly all of Mali, and flat, dotted with baobab trees, huge termite mounds (a couple of metres high), shrubs, and fields of thin ripe millet, looking like anaemic corn stalks.

I can feel the sweat trickling down my back.

Mohammed, the bus company employee not driving, regularly climbs over the sacks in the aisle to inquire how I am. Am I too tired? Am I not too hot?

Nope. Everything's great, Mohammed. I'm lovin' every minute.