



by Ted Cookson

The Road to

Timbuktu

Inaccessible Timbuktu served as a siren for European travellers for centuries. Between 1588 and 1880 some four dozen Europeans attempted to reach the fabled city. However, only four succeeded. The Scotsman

Major Alexander Gordon Laing was the first to reach Timbuktu, in 1826. Laing remained for six weeks but was murdered by Tuareg in the Sahara on his homeward journey, only two days north of town. The Frenchman Rene Caillie, who set off posing as a Muslim only after first having studied Arabic in Senegal, reached Timbuktu in 1828. Caillie became the first European to visit Timbuktu and then return to Europe

successfully. The German Heinrich Barth arrived in 1853 disguised as a Tuareg during the course of his five-year exploration of the Sahara. After a stay of nearly a year, Barth also managed to return to Europe via caravan. The fourth explorer, the Austrian Oscar Lenz, arrived

in 1880. Founded in the eleventh century by Tuareg nomads, Timbuktu's strategic location in present-day Mali south of the Sahara near the northern bend of the Niger River facilitated its growth into an important commercial centre. At the southern end of the trans-Saharan



Caillie's house



Kids in Timbuktu street



Sangha market scene

camel caravan route leading up to the Mediterranean, Timbuktu prospered greatly from trade. Gold, slaves, ivory, kola nuts and ostrich feathers from the south were exchanged for salt, cloth, copper, tin and horses from the north. In 1494 the traveller Leo Africanus noted that the many doctors, judges and imams residing in Timbuktu were well-maintained by the Songhai king. By the middle of the sixteenth century Timbuktu's population burgeoned under Songhai rule, and the rich city could boast of having 150 Islamic schools with many thousands of students from all over West Africa. The 1591 invasion by a musket-equipped Moroccan mercenary army signalled the beginning of Timbuktu's decline. At about this same time European ships began to arrive off the West African coast, destroying the centuries-old trans-Saharan trade monopoly. Drought, famine and unstable government then became a way of life until the French took control three centuries later, in 1894. However, by that time Timbuktu's glory days were long over and the city's significance on the world stage was but a historical footnote. Today it is tourism on which Timbuktu manages to survive.

I travelled from Cairo to Timbuktu in January 2008, flying first to Bamako, the capital of Mali, on comfortable Kenya Airways

737 jets via Nairobi. After an overnight in Bamako so I could tour the market and the excellent national museum, I continued on Air Malienne, a domestic airline which wet leases its sole prop jet with an English-speaking crew from a South African charter carrier. The airport at Timbuktu with its new terminal building is not far from town, so it didn't take long to reach the sandy streets of the old city, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 1992.

Three of the oldest mosques in West Africa are in Timbuktu. The most ancient of these mud-brick structures is the Dyingerey Ber Mosque, built in 1325 by an Andalusian architect by order of the Malian king, Kankan Moussa, after his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca. The Dyingerey Ber Mosque is currently being renovated with the assistance of the Agha Khan Cultural Trust. Sidi Yahya Mosque and the Sankore Mosque were constructed during the fifteenth century. The latter housed Timbuktu's well-known Sankore University, one of the largest educational institutions in the Muslim world during the sixteenth century. Today the houses where the most famous European explorers stayed are all identified by prominent plaques. While the former residences of Laing and Caillie cannot be entered and not much remains of the house of Lenz, Barth's home is now



Djenne Mosque



Minaret of Sankore Mosque



Carved Dagon door

a small museum. Timbuktu is also known for its ancient Islamic manuscript collections. The Ahmed Baba Center for Historical Research contains over 15,000 such manuscripts, the oldest of which, a document of Islamic law, dates to 1204! There are also some collections of early Islamic manuscripts in Timbuktu which remain in private hands.

Mali, the largest country in West Africa with 1.2 million square km, has more to offer the traveller than just Timbuktu. For most tourists the road to Timbuktu also passes through Djenne and "Dogon Country," both of which can be reached from the river port of Mopti, also served by Air Malienne. In



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Mopti pinasses



Dogon village of Songo



Bamako market



Dogon masks

up the Niger from Timbuktu!

Picturesque Djenne, founded in the thirteenth century on an island in the Bani River, once rivaled Timbuktu; and the political fortunes of the two cities ran in parallel. Djenne was designated a World Heritage Site in 1988. Today, with a population of 10,000, Djenne is known for its colourful Monday market and for its very impressive mosque. The Djenne Mosque was constructed in 1907 on the site of another mosque dating back to the thirteenth century. Featuring three minarets, the Djenne Mosque, raised some three metres above the ground level of the market which it faces, is the world's largest mud building!

fact, a pinasse (boat) tour of Mopti, situated on the Bani River near its junction with the Niger River, shouldn't be missed. In Mopti it is fascinating to view the busy riverbanks and the other pinasses which contain all manner of cargos, including live animals, firewood, dried fish, and even large salt slabs that have been transported

In spite of Timbuktu's world-wide name recognition, it is so-called "Dogon Country" which is the most-visited area of Mali. Some 400,000 Dogon tribesmen today cultivate millet, rice, sorghum and onions and raise their



Dogon shirt

livestock on the 4,000 square km of plains and plateau which surround the 200-km-long Bandiagara Escarpment. These are said to be the ancestors of people who had arrived there by at least the fifteenth century. Traditionally the Dogon people built cliff villages for defensive purposes. Today, however, many Dogon also live in villages on the Dogon Plateau.

The buildings include houses made of mud and rock, raised granaries with conical straw roofs, and storerooms. Each village also contains a low-roofed, nine-pillared open meeting room for village elders as well as shrines and other unique structures. The spiritual beliefs and symbolism of the animistic Dogon culture are unique, and local guides help to explain the various complicated Dogon circumcision, cult and death rituals. Village inhabitants attempt to sell homemade artefacts such as masks, wooden doors and jewellery to tourists during their visit.

The village of Sangha, where there is a simple but clean hotel, makes an excellent base for exploring Dogon Plateau villages such as Songo and one or more of the cliff villages such as Banani constructed at the base of the Bandiagara Escarpment. Dogon villages are composed of clusters of buildings organized by clan.

Colourful and rich in history, Mali, one of West Africa's most interesting destinations, is more accessible than one might think. Bamako, the capital, is now easy to reach by air from Cairo. In addition, Mali boasts excellent two-lane highways with little traffic; and domestic air service is available nearly every day to both Timbuktu and Mopti, the jumping-off point for Djenne and the fascinating Dogon Country.



Scribe with ancient manuscripts



Meeting room for Dogon elders



Dogon cliff dwellings