
Mali: Into Timbuktu

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How many times have we all heard or used the name "Timbuktu"? The city has become synonymous with a place so far away and remote that we assume it must be virtually inaccessible - perhaps even a myth.

One of the first explorers to write of Timbuktu was the Islamic scholar Ibn Battuta who visited there in 1353. He tells us of the great Sultan Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire, who, returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325, led an enormous caravan of 15,000 camels and 60,000 people across the Sahara to Timbuktu where he set up his court.

Over time, rumours spread throughout Europe of the riches of Timbuktu. Leo Africanus, an envoy of the Medici Pope Leo X visited there in 1526 and described the Sultan's palace, veiled women and the gold, including a single ingot in the royal treasury that weighed 970 pounds.

As late as 1620, the English explorer Richard Jobson wrote: "The roofs of its houses were represented to be covered with plates of gold, the bottoms of the rivers to glisten with precious metals, and the mountains had only to be excavated to yield a profusion of the metallic treasure."

Other reports claimed the fountains flowed with rosewater and that the sultan bestowed riches and gifts upon all visitors. These embellishments prompted a flurry of expeditions from European explorers, many of whom died in the heartless desert before ever attaining their goal.

Strangely enough, these exaggerations may have been prophecy. No fewer than six international mining companies are busy today extracting new-found gold from the mountains that lie west of Timbuktu. But little of this twentieth century wealth has found its way to the city. Today's Timbuktu is but a shadow of its former self. Its population once exceeded 200,000; now it's a mere 10,000.

Originally founded as a Tuareg camp along the great salt trade route in 1100 A.D., it became a strategic hub of ancient commerce for several successive empires. Salt was traded for gold, slaves and kola nuts from the Sahel of West Africa. At one time it bordered the Niger but over the centuries the river has changed course, abandoning Timbuktu to the desert eight miles away. Several inches of sand now cover the asphalt streets as the Sahara relentlessly nibbles away at the town. Noble efforts are made to keep the desert at bay, but the "sand-fences" that line Timbuktu's perimeter do little more than temporarily slow the encroaching dunes.

Once magnificent, Timbuktu is now little more than a sleepy, sweltering stop on the adventure-tourism trail. Most visitors fly in and out in a single day, arriving at noon on one of the twice-weekly Air Malitas flights from Bamako (Mali's capital), and departing again on the same plane later in the day.

Upon arrival, the police station will put an official Timbuktu visa in your passport - and there is a certain charm about sending postcards to friends from the local Post Office. Overland and river routes to the city are arduous and not recommended.

But there are definitely worthwhile things to see and experience in this once famous city in the desert.

In all its eight-century history, Timbuktu has never been sacked or burned by new conquerors. This is testament to the high esteem attached to its reputation as a centre of Islamic learning. By the mid-sixteenth century - the so-called Golden Age of Timbuktu - the city boasted over 150 schools, including specific guilds for tradesmen. There were 26 establishments alone for tailor-scholars who manufactured textiles for Allah's faithful in as far away as Arabia.

Education was free to all. The people of Timbuktu bestowed their learning upon any who would venture there to study, believing that those who endured the hazardous journey to their desert metropolis had rightly earned a scholarship. At the height of its glory, Timbuktu housed the impressive library of the Sankore Mosque and many other libraries attached to other mosques or held in private hands. The learned scholar Hajji Ahmed bin 'Umar had a library with over 700 texts alone, among them some of the rarest books ever written in Arabic.

Three of those ancient mosques are still standing and in use by the resident Muslim population, chief among them the Jingerebir Mosque, built in 1325 by no other than Sultan Mansa Musa.

A handful of scholars still adhere to Timbuktu's legacy, studying the Koran and imparting its teachings to all who will

listen. Here too are the preserved homes of nineteenth century explorers: Rene Caille from France and Englishman Gordon Laing.

Arriving in Timbuktu, visitors are accosted by self-styled guides, eager to show you around - and more than willing to sell you local products of the Tuareg craftsmen. For many, this is the only means of employment, for Timbuktu no longer holds a strategic place on the trade route.

Tuareg blacksmiths are renowned for swords and daggers with intricate designs of inlaid ivory, silver and bronze, and Tuareg jewelry is of the finest silver. You might also come across highly valued African trade beads. The millefiore and chevron beads range in age from 80 to 300 years and are rapidly becoming prized collectibles.

A good place to eat is the Restaurant Poulet d'Or (the Golden Chicken). Rice and chicken are the order of the day and the beer is cold. Should you want to spend a night in Timbuktu, the Sofitel approaches a 2-star rating. The cheaper Hotel Bouctou is rather spartan but does have air conditioning and the staff are very friendly.

Who knows - maybe the next time someone makes a candid remark about Timbuktu, you will be able to respond with "I've been there!"

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