

A person wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and dark pants is walking across a vast, orange desert dune. The sky is a pale, hazy orange, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The dunes are rolling and have a fine, rippled texture. The overall mood is serene and adventurous.

# Drifting THROUGH THE Sands OF TIME

A Saharan Adventure  
by Ron Laikind







My throat is so dry I can barely swallow. With every shallow, labored breath the intense cold burns my lungs. My head aches so badly it feels as though it's being squeezed in a vice, threatening to pop my eyes from their very sockets. My legs feel as if they are filled with lead. My oxygen-deprived, feeble mind repeats the mantra, "Right foot over left; rest, breathe, left foot over right..." ... no longer feeling the excruciating burn in the tips of my fingers and toes – the flesh has already frozen. A tiny voice coming from the reptilian section of my brain begins to amplify... "...stop, stop, STOP!"

The voice succeeds in overpowering my previous mantra. I slump over my walking poles and dreamily reassess the condition of my frozen limbs. Altimeter read: 21,600 feet. Still, about 1200 feet from the summit. That's it. This climb is finished! As I succumb to self-preservation, I begin my descent.

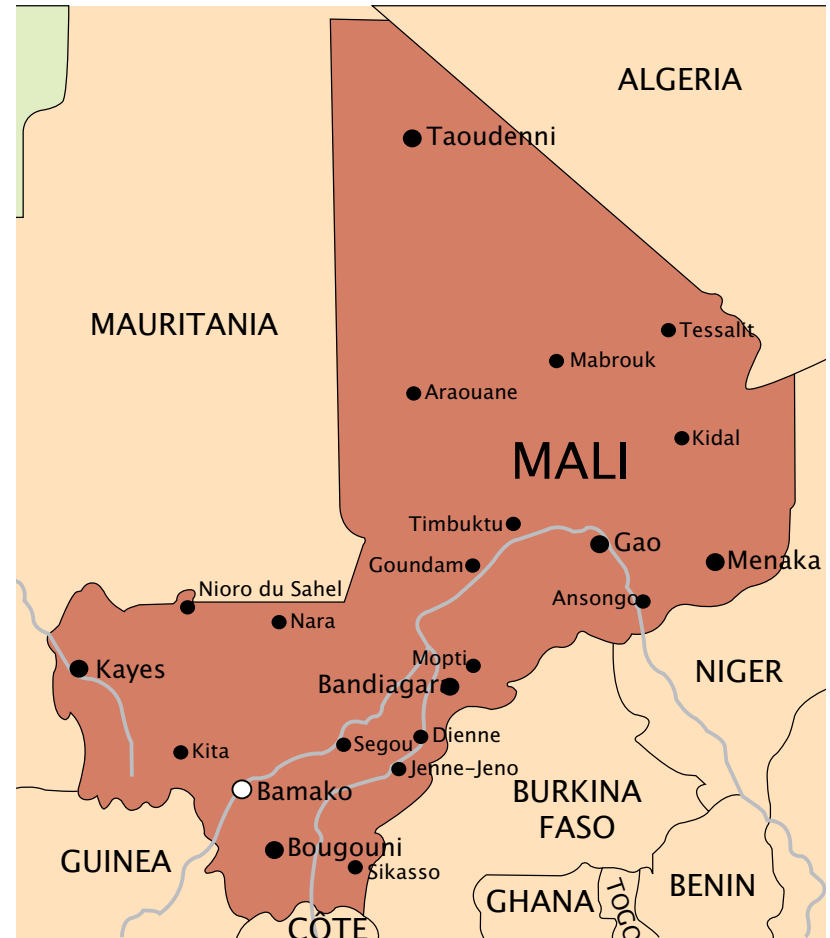
I stumble, first with a to-and-fro dropping motion, then, violently back and forth...suddenly I am jarred back to reality...

# The scorching African sun is bearing down on my head with unrelenting intensity.

The searing heat bounces off the Saharan sand. Boomeranging, cascading heat waves hit me horizontally as they channel off the high surrounding dunes. The 125 degree heat envelops me in a cocoon of molten air. My camel lurches and plods his way down a steep dune, awakening me as he has 100 times before from my semi-conscious, dream-like state.

It was the last climb up Cerro Aconcagua in Argentina that actually put me on this path in West Africa. While I was freezing, I decided my next adventure had to be warm, giving me a much-needed break from high altitude trekking expeditions. Be careful of what you wish – you may get it, in abundance!

A bit of modest research led me to the end of the proverbial road; the long fabled Timbuktu in Mali. Once rumored to have streets and buildings lined with gold, this ancient city in the Sahel region of the Saharan southern edge was founded around 1000 AD. No Westerner had ever succeeded in making this trip and lived to tell of it until 1828. The few Western infidels who attempted the journey either succumbed to the harsh desert conditions or were felled by the torturous swords of the *Taureg* warriors (pronounced ‘twor-egg’). Then the fable of gold was laid to rest, as it had been plundered many times during previous centuries. Timbuktu remained an important trade center for slaves, gold, ivory and salt until around 1600 when Portuguese trade ships off the Moroccan coast circumvented the Trans-Saharan trade route, making trade more accessible and far more economical. However, one illusive treasure remained deep in this vast desert: salt.



About 500 miles north of Timbuktu, immense underground salt deposits in dry ancient sea beds were mined by souls who were forced to withstand the savage heat, back-breaking work, and deplorable conditions at the Taoudenni salt quarries. Salt, a necessity for life, was literally worth its weight in gold and took the lives of many slaves, prisoners and the regretful daring.

The introduction of the Asian camel around the 1st Century AD made deep desert travel possible. They are called “ships of the desert” for several reasons. Their feet are engineered superbly for the soft desert sand, they can go days on end without drinking water and their humps store fat for emergency food rations. They have three eyelids, two with long eyelashes to shed sand, and the third is opaque, so they can see their way through the frequently intense sand storms. They also have the ability to close their nostrils and re-open them as needed between sand swirls. Banding into great caravans numbering in the hundreds gave the cameleers, *Azalai* (pronounced ‘as-ah-lie), added safety and security when transporting the heavy salt slabs. Traveling in numbers offered protection from Taureg warriors, once vicious pillagers of the desert known as “the blue men” (indigo dyes used in their blue clothes bled through, staining their skin). To this day great salt

caravans continue carrying back enough salt from the Taoudenni salt mines to supply much of West Africa. Even though salt is no longer worth even a fraction of its weight in gold, the large slabs of Taoudenni salt are still a sought-after commodity, as desert dwellers claim it to be the highest quality salt in the world.

Camels, Arabian nights, Taureg warriors, vast empty deserts, Lawrence of Arabia...all the stuff of a good adventure! This was just too irresistible to pass up. So plans were made, tickets purchased, equipment procured and off I went armed with a copy of Michael Benanav’s current book, Men Of Salt. Michael recently completed a similar feat.

I contacted him for advice.

“Let me ask you one question,” he responded. “Why are you doing this?”

“No real reason short of the adventure.”

After thoughtful consideration, he replied, “...You know you’re crazy. It’s a miserable, desolate and dangerous trip to do. If just for adventure there are much nicer, safer, more scenic, more comfortable trips out there.”

I thanked him for his advice.

I departed October 7th.

Because it is the tail end of brutal summer heat, October is a bit premature to embark upon a Saharan trip. Resourcing from home, I couldn't find an Azalai willing to go until November, but I remained confident when I arrived in Timbuktu I could persuade one to guide me. Getting to Timbuktu overland was quite a trek in itself.

Once I arrived and after several disappointments and the start of many lies and half-truths, through interpreters, I contracted a dubious fellow named Ali. Ali, an Arab, was an intriguing

character, with a veiled turban, a calm demeanor and an intense mystique that seemed penetrating, even captivating. A one page contract written by myself and translated by an interpreter spelled out all that was agreed upon, including, due to my own special dietary demands, that I was to be supplied with enough tins of fish and chicken (for protein) to see me through the 20-25 day journey. "Nothing with four legs," I stipulated through the interpreter, "and by the way, no kangaroo either."

Ali didn't laugh. "No problem," he said,

"As long as you can stomach sardines, Insh'Allah (God willing)." The phrase Insh'Allah is spoken at the end of most sentences involving the future.

I thought about it. "Fair enough, but I also need extra time to purify all my own drinking water brought up from the desert wells."

Again, "No problem, Insh'Allah."

So I paid him a deposit, balance due at sojourn's end. He assured me, "In two days' time all provisions, camels, and an Azalai will be ready to proceed, Insh'Allah!"







Almost as an afterthought, he added, “Of course the Azalai will not speak any English, only French, Tamarshak and Arabic.” Three languages! I felt somewhat embarrassed, since I have merely my native tongue. It seemed unbelievable that an uneducated guide, although unable to write in any language, spoke fluently in three.

I put word out on the dusty streets immediately for an interpreter to join at a modest wage, knowing this individual was going to be my lifeline. He would be responsible for communicating my needs with every person I encountered, since no one spoke any English. This I found in a delightful 20-ish year old (many desert dwellers don’t know when they were born) guide named Elhadje. He was dressed in Western style knock-off jeans, sunglasses and proudly sported a cell phone. The MTV generation seems to have infiltrated almost all corners of the globe. I later procured (after much protest) native clothing for him. Not only are Western clothes uncomfortable in desert conditions but they also look grotesquely out of place. He began boasting to everyone he knew about his upcoming journey. The response was not what he expected to hear; not quite out of earshot and only after translation did I realize his friends and family were trying to persuade him not to join my expedition.

“Elhadje, think how dangerous the trip is! Elhadje, you may die in the desert!”

This was more than a little disconcerting coming from the locals!

However, his contract was signed, and being a totally honorable young man, he promised to fulfill his obligations. He also caved in to my demands that he wear native clothes.

Timbuktu has the feel of a dusty and busy Old West frontier town capable of fulfilling the basic provisions for desert journeys. After scouring several of the small shopping stalls I procured, in addition (just in case!) to the provisions supposedly to be supplied by Ali, a dozen tiny tins of tuna, a few kilos each of peanuts and dates, ten single serving cans of fruit juice, four cases of one and a half liter bottles of water, crackers, cookies, half a dozen disposable lighters (Later, to my horror, I noticed they had portraits of Bin Laden on them.) and a kilo of tobacco to gift out or trade to Nomads we might encounter along the way. Next I visited a tailor in order to shed *my* Western clothes, primarily for two reasons:

Only the simple indigenous garb would be effective in their environment (definitely proven to me, much later, much wiser!)



As a Westerner, there was an implicit necessity to try to... blend in. Moot, perhaps, but worth the try.

Topping the outfit off was five meters of blue cloth worn as a *cheche*, a turban. I quickly learned that the fine sands became lodged under the complex straps of my new Tevas, rubbing the flesh raw. So, replicating my guide's shoes, a pair of CFA500 (\$1) plastic flip-flop sandals were purchased to walk and ride the 1000-mile journey. Now that I was fitting in a little better my only worry was looking like Bin Laden to any Westerners I might encounter.

I then contacted the U.S. embassy in Mali's capital, Bamako,

to register my journey. They told me they were pulling out all non-essentials from Timbuktu especially deep in the northern desert, of course the direction I was headed. There had been at least nine Tauregs ambushed and killed near the village of Araouane. More were injured and some taken prisoner due to some ill-fated act of revenge by Algerian Islamic insurgents who pledged allegiance to al Qaeda. They said even the Peace Corps in Timbuktu was ordered to pack up and pull out due to insurgent threats against Americans. Nonetheless, they registered my course and wished me well, followed by a cursory "You Were Forewarned" statement.

After much preparation and a little anxiety, the day came to leave. According to my contract, I was to view all foodstuffs and supplies provided by Ali and my

guide, but soon I realized it was not going to happen. Instead, I was picked up via 4-wheel drive and taken to Ali's abode where a tea tradition began.

After hours of waiting and copious amounts of sweet tea, I was informed the Azalai was still far in the desert and would not arrive until the next morning.



I half-heartedly agreed to a further 4-wheel drive trip about fifteen miles into the desert to wait there until the camels arrived.

After the unromantic disappointment of departing Timbuktu by truck rather than the mystique of a caravan, followed by a restless night in the dunes, the camels did, as promised, show up mid-morning with the Azalai leading. A small, wiry, intensely weathered man, Lamana, appeared to be in his mid 50s (I later found out he was a mere 40-ish). However he seemed very

fit. Lamana retired from caravanning salt about eight years earlier in order to guide tourists on usually short excursions into the desert. Ali reiterated that Lamana was quite capable of leading this expedition across the vast sands and would have no trouble locating the life-preserving wells along the way. Therefore, with some trepidation Elhadje and I agreed to place our full dependency and lives in his hopefully capable hands.

Due to our tardy departure, once again



the possible inspection of all provisions was overlooked, replaced by a twice-daily, 30 minute ritual of loading and unloading camels. Its technical nature reminded me of family vacations as a child. Serious business. My parents enjoyed cross-country traveling in the infamous station wagon. Dad had the serious and auspicious task of loading the top luggage racks, tying complex knots and filling up the entire back, leaving just enough strategic room for restricted airflow and all of us kids to stretch out.



Now, of course, thousands of miles away with strangers in a strange land, I immediately wanted to help with the camel-loading procedure. However, I was permitted to only assist with minor tie-ons. Not being able to understand any verbal directions, I was just too slow and, reminiscent of the looks Dad gave me years ago, in the way.

Thus it went throughout the entire journey. I eventually got quick enough to dismantle, but never quite quick enough on the load.

There were no actual saddles for the camels, just large blankets that doubled as our sleeping covers – fleas and all! Straw-like grasses bundled together and fit on either side of their hump served as a bumper to protect their ribs from heavy loads. Saddle sores are always a given to a greenhorn. Knowing this, I beat the system by wearing padded biking shorts in place of underwear and an English saddle sheepskin cover topped my blanket. To my delight, the combination worked, as I never developed the hampering sores. Chalk up the first point for Western technology!





After several alterations to the saddles and gear, we were finally off! To my initial dismay, we began by leading the camels for hours on end. My feet and the new flip-flops were in constant battle for proper purchase on the soft sands. Walking in sand requires different mechanics and muscle groups, which in turn, if one is not used to uneven sands, will painfully inflame a beginner's legs.

Studying Lamana's seemingly effortless gait, I observed he shuffled and slid his feet, barely sinking into the sand. I came down heel to toe, invariably breaking the delicate crust on the surface, deeply sinking my feet, making every step a struggle. Every time my foot slid off the slick plastic sandal I was penalized

by *cram-crams*, a vicious little sticker/thorn that, when broken off under the skin, would eventually, after much pain, slowly fester out. With hundreds of walking miles in front of me, I hoped to conquer the slip and slide technique sooner than later!

Only after the western sky turned from a fiery red to orange would a cooling, magnificent sunset sink over the shadowy dunes. This is when we would stop for the necessary ritual of prayer, usually repeated several times daily. I started out using this time to make adjustments, drink water and tend to bodily functions. However, as time went on I too used these moments to just sit in reverence and enjoy the natural beauty unfolding before us.



After prayer it was finally time to ride! A friendly bit of advice: Getting on a standing camel is something of a feat in itself. A firm pull on the left ear will bring his head down to knee level, then with a hop up on his neck using one's shin and firmly holding on with the other hand to the make-shift saddle, the camel usually will, in one quick motion, raise his head and catapult the rider upon his back, leaving a surprised beginner facing backwards. But after a quick 180-degree spin, the initiate is good to go.

Well, that's the way it's supposed to happen.

Reality modifies all good theories and how-to handbooks. On my first attempt I flew right over and landed with a sickening thump on my back. After a few chuckles and sly smirks from Lamana, I promised myself that within a day or so I would be able to mount with fluid grace. We rode on into the night, always following the North Star. The heat of the night was still stifling, but in contrast to the searing temperatures of the day, it felt like

velvet luxury. Living in Arizona and hiking all summer in our desert heat was good acclimation for this trip; however, nothing can really prepare one for the dry harshness of the Sahara.

Riding for hours on end on a camel is, obviously and most emphatically, uncomfortable. The motion, although physically demanding, becomes very monotonous, especially when exhausted. The top of my head was over nine feet in the air, and a fall from this height could have catastrophic consequences. A camel's walk is far from graceful; with missteps and lurches one must stay acutely aware. At night if not for the endlessly splendid celestial lightshow, completely unhindered from any earthly light pollution, monotony would have surely overwhelmed me. So, after running out of strained, usually meager conversation, each of us had to deal quietly with our own dreams and demons, as well as vivid hallucinations caused by the sheer tedium of trying to stay awake hour after hour. Vigilance can manifest itself into actual physical pain.

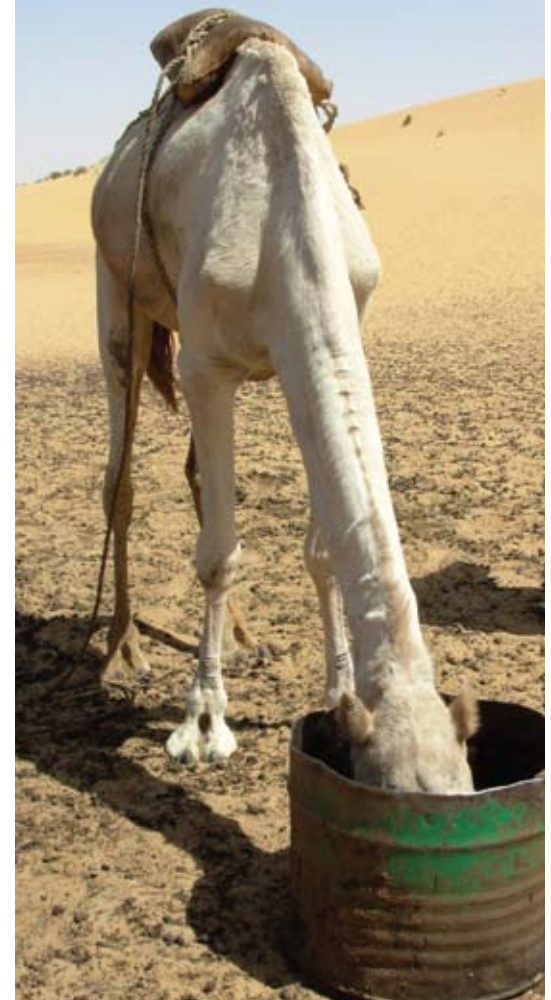
Once we began the trek Lamana always maintained an urgency to reach each well within a given time limit (known only to him) and would only stop if he needed to. Thus, if Elhadje or I had to stop for any reason, even less than five minutes, it would take up to an hour to catch up to our small procession. I enjoyed the solitude from time to time except for the fact all the water was on the camels so the further I'd fall behind, the more dehydrated I would become trying to reach the camels. Rather a hefty price for privacy!



The wells, two to four days apart, always felt like a special place, if for no other reason than just to have a goal or a destination point to reach. Sometimes the wells were teeming with life as caravans and Nomads would gather, waiting their turn to draw the precious water from deep below the sands.

We carried a goatskin bucket, approximately 200 feet of handmade hemp and a wooden pulley, to be attached to branches fashioned into poles that curved up and over most of the wells. Once affixed, the bucket is dropped in and pulled with several short strokes in order to fill it, then the other end of the rope is tied to a camel, which is led as far away as a couple hundred feet.

Once the bucket emerges, (usually with large black crickets covering it!), it's manhandled over the edge and dumped into 55-gallon drums cut in half, wherein livestock and humans alike share the bounty. It's then scooped and poured, animal cud and all, into *guerbas*, halved truck tire inner tubes that have been sewn shut on one end and, when full (resembling a giant sausage), are tied shut on the open end. Two people are required to lift it and securely tie one on each side of the camel for balance.



Most of the well-waters' purity is dubious at best, to downright foul smelling, with a deep green hue. This is an accepted fact of life for the Nomads but certainly not for me.

Consequently, I used a heavy duty, high output water purifying hand pump system to clean up to ten liters daily, in hope of keeping waterborne creatures out of my body. However, this did little to alleviate the foul smell, taste and color. The water was so poor that most of the time I had to clean the pump out every few liters. This entire process would take an hour out of my precious rest time. While my companions were snoozing, I was pumping – sweating and exerting what little reserves I had left to stave off the inevitable dysentery.



Armed with the knowledge that some wells are worse than others, I began rationing my bottled water, which if drunk continuously would only last about ten days. Therefore, I alternated between the best wells and my previously bottled water. Due to the direct sun on the guerbas during daylight hours the water was always just short of boiling. Lamana showed me a trick during our rest periods. By putting water in a bowl and slightly tilting it toward the wind, evaporation cooled it to a refreshing temperature in less than 15 minutes.





Lamana would never camp near a well. For logistical purposes, I couldn't understand this. Thus, I pursued the issue only to be told, albeit quite reluctantly through hesitant translation, that genies draw from the wells late at night and we don't want to be anywhere nearby when the spirits are busy. He swore several nights he could hear them going about their dark deeds, and was astonished that I couldn't hear them! Once far enough from any genies, we made camp, which is simply unloading the camels and spreading out our saddle blankets on the sand along with cram-crams, ants, ticks and various other creepy crawlers.

The next point chalked up for Western technology: My self-inflating insulated sleeping mat gave me about an inch barrier above the creepy crawlers. It was a bit of a struggle to set it up at each rest stop, and I felt just a little guilty for the creature comfort, but I enjoyed, especially after Lamana's scrutiny, his barely detectible approval.



The next chore was to hobble the camels with a short rope tied to their front legs like shackles so they could forage the sparse desert grasses throughout the night without wandering too many miles from camp. Then it came time to gather combustibles in order to build a modest fire. Fuel is always sparse, so we never built a fire any bigger than necessary to cook with, and warm at most, a hand or two. The Nomads' parents must have drilled in the same "waste not, want not" verbiage as ours do, but to a much larger degree.

Then, of course, came teatime, always three servings; this takes precedence to all but prayer.

Next it's time to cook: Couscous with only one small tin of sardines or my favorite, tuna, ala tomato paste, always split three ways. The continuous blowing sands insured that everything cooked, boiled, drunk or served always had a generous amount of sand in it so every bite crunched. Food, served normally in a communal bowl, is scooped up by right hand (never [!] with the left), manipulated into mouth-sized balls of mush, and then eaten handful after handful. I was given my own plate and fork, and told I didn't eat fast enough to compete. However, I noticed a kind of division line created in the bowl as they ate. Perhaps they didn't trust I had proper dining etiquette. This was a relief, as I surely didn't trust theirs. There were no breads, vegetables or fruits – only carbohydrates and very little protein. The fish, due to its expense, was a rare treat for the guides, one not to be passed up for any reason I later learned. I was worried about sustaining my strength on such a sparse diet so I decided to strictly ration my limited private emergency

stash of various American protein bars. I also depended on multiple vitamins to help see me through.

After eating, usually somewhere between nine and eleven p.m., came time to clean the dishes. This is done quite efficiently with the sterile sands of the desert (can't waste precious water!).

The toilette was the next point of order. This was always a long walk from camp if there were no shrubs or dunes around. Muslims are very private and modest people so one must be quite far from view. Luckily I had the foresight to bring rolls of paper with me, as the desert dwellers somehow use only sand to clean themselves with the always-taboo left hand. Once the deed is in progress, half-dollar sized black beetles (dung beetles) instantly appear on the scene, roll the waste into ping-pong sized balls, turn backwards, and with their back legs roll their bounty away to be buried. They then lay their eggs in it to be consumed by the young as they eat their way out. They serve a very important role, keeping the desert clean!



After all the chores were behind us came time to relax, gaze at the stars, talk about the upcoming day and unwind in the tranquil light of our small campfire. These moments can't be explained.

I have been asked time and time again, "Ron, why in God's name do you do these trips?!"

Truthfully, it's a legitimate question. However, for all the hardships, costs incurred and health issues that may arise in Third World adventure travel, there are moments so rare in our modern world they make every risk and discomfort seem nominal when weighed against the experience and personal reward. After a hard day of travel, sleep came easily as I slid into one of my frequent "Arabian Nights" dreams of Aladdin's lamp, flying carpets and genies.

Waking up was not as comforting! Lamana, whom I gave the moniker of "The Machine," was always and ever ready with the tea. After a meager Taureg breakfast of dates and raw peanuts, it was time to begin the morning packing routine, always a Braille-like, probing mystery in the pitch-black night. Lamana, by some sort of internal radar, would set off in what appeared to me as a random direction to retrieve the wandering camels, by now several miles away and well out of sight



in the darkness. Sure enough, rarely past 30 minutes he would lead them back to camp from the same general direction of his departure! Within 30 more minutes, we were off into the darkness of a new moon. I couldn't even see my feet. When the terrain was uneven, I was in a continuous falling motion, only saved by my next forward step. Eventually I learned to reach up with one hand and hold onto any gear attached

to a camel for support. I was actually able to sleep walk a bit this way without falling. The good news: nights in October are warm enough for no covers and quite pleasant for travel. My routine began by walking three to four hours, then after sunrise, ride for an hour or so, then walk for several more and so on until, due to the brutal afternoon sun, we overwhelmingly welcomed our eleven or twelve o'clock heat-forced break.





During the first half of the journey we had the occasional thorn tree to retreat to, along with thousands of ticks! We'd spend the next four to five hours, usually until four p.m., under its sparse shade adjusting ourselves clockwise, chasing its shadow as the sun's position changed.

Not seeing a soul with an unhampered view across the expansive level desert, it always amazed me when a robed, turbaned figure or two would appear out of what seemed to be thin air. Nomads are spread out across the desert in small family clans raising and tending their goats and camels. They live as they have for millenniums, under large, wall-less tents. Most of these people know little, if any, of the outside world. Some of the elders visit Timbuktu on trading excursions and have seen some technology, but most youth and women I encountered hadn't the slightest concept of a television. They are hard-working, simple people. They were always amazed to see me, an obvious outsider in *their* desert, and when explained I was crossing the desert for no apparent reason, they thought I was crazy. They always cautiously eyed me as they sat with us to share tea or our lunch. That is the Code of the Desert: "Share with others as you may need their charity next."



Western items such as my sunglasses were ever conspicuous and always held their attention. My offer of tobacco went a long way in breaking the obvious ice and diffusing some of their initial mistrust.

Several days into the trip a trio of brothers appeared. I guessed their ages ranged from 13 to 19.

After sharing food and drink with them, Elhadje informed me that he and Lamana needed more food. The small portions of *my*

fish were not enough to sustain them; they required meat. He told me the Nomads would sell them a goat for 10,000CFA (\$20.00). I immediately gave them the money, assuming this was a win-win for all concerned parties (except the goat, of course). My hope was they would stop eating my fish and I would get my intended full portions! The two youngest brothers left to retrieve the goat and a camel so the eldest could ride with us to fetch water for his family from the well we were headed to (safety in numbers).

While we waited for the boys to return I decided to talk to the remaining one about his knowledge of the outside world. I asked the easy questions: television, telephones, and radio. He had heard of radios and phones but had never experienced them. After consulting Elhadje and Lamana, they agreed I should let him experience technology, even with the possibility of an overload. So I pulled out my secret weapons: first my digital camera. With lightning speed I took his photo, leaving no

time for protest. I showed him – himself.

He was, after the initial shock, enthralled.

Then, showing him the zoom control, I let him zoom in and out on the picture of his face. Next came filming him with the video function. This actually terrified him. However, once he calmed down he became fascinated. Then I brought out the big guns: a portable PlayStation! I started easy by playing music via the unit's weak internal speaker system.

This brought shock and fascination to his face. After a break-in period I plugged in its ear buds and, with much coaxing, I placed them in his ears. As the music filled his head tears actually streamed down his face.

Next came the movie function. I really let him have it, with The Matrix! As soon as the feature started he screamed something about me being a genie, shrinking people in the box, and then he ran away. Elhadje went after him, assured him I was okay and the magic Western items were harmless. He relented, came back to The Matrix and watched at least a half hour of it until my satellite phone rang! I let him listen to my conversation; by this time he was well on his way to sensory overload. Next with who-knows-what-kind-of translation through Elhadje, I told him about how there have been men on the moon, people living in space and that the fast moving stars seen nightly in the desert's clear heavens are really satellites. Now even Lamana, unbelieving, became upset at this notion. I had crossed his intellectual line. I surmised when the boy returned to his family and tried to relate his newfound knowledge they would surely call him *majnoon*, crazy. I can only hope I hadn't ruined, but enriched his life and enhanced his yearning for knowledge.





Several hours later the boys returned with dinner on the hoof. An excitement buzzed within all of them as the impending kill and feast was close at hand.

I normally would walk away on such an occasion; however, the animal-like actions displayed by even Elhadje fed my fascination. Once the blood letting was done, the carcass stripped and the fire started, all of them, using their bare hands, began ripping and tearing out all the entrails and organs, quickly cooking their bounty directly on the coals and in the stew pot.

A feeding frenzy ensued, sounds of sucking, sipping, crunching and slurping, breaking the peaceful serenity of the still night. After they were sated, the belching finished, the two younger boys quietly disappeared into the night.





After a fitful sleep we were up by three a.m., fed, packed and ready to go.

I then noticed the goat carcass tied to Lamana's camel in front of me. I knew this would be a problem, as it eventually became fly-infested, emitting a strong rancid odor of rotting flesh. Soon, after some coaxing, he quietly agreed to tie it to Elhadje's camel in the rear.

As we moved ever deeper into the desert, the terrain took on subtle changes. The scourge of the desert, the cram-crams, finally disappeared – only to be replaced by other insidious nuisances. One day as Lamana and I walked several miles from our camp toward a well, with one camel in tow, we waded through some calf-high grasses. I had always pulled up my pant legs to my knees to avoid the possibility of hitch hiking cram-crams. By the time I reached the well my legs were ablaze with an itching burn. A rash developed all over them. Once back to camp I had Elhadje inquire as to what I had gotten into and why I wasn't warned about it. Lamana calmly and with a straight face, deadpanned, "You didn't ask." The itch remained until the next day, just as Lamana predicted. The rash subsided; however, my newly acquired constant questioning about everything continued until the end of the journey.



The trees were becoming scarce and had to be hunted to ensure shade for our afternoon breaks. The shrubs and grasses became fewer and scrawnier with each mile. It became harder for the camels to feed, so we gave them more leeway with their foraging while we walked or rode. The leeway allowed them to bob their heads up and down as well as to and fro, which in turn, slowed and hampered our pace as they reached for their fodder. Even the different species of insects became fewer. The dry heat was becoming increasingly intense. Lamana

admonished, “Once we get into November it will start to cool a little during the day, but the nights will become very cold.” I couldn’t wait!

At times the landscape was so flat and stark, devoid of any point of reference as far as the eye could see, it felt as if we were, at our three mph pace, actually going nowhere. The monochromatic landscape was broken only by the stark-white, bleached bones of camels that had succumbed to the hostile environment and, probably, too heavy a load of salt slabs.

The occasional ancient archeological sites mercifully diverted our attention from the monotonous view. They were usually covered with an abundance of pottery shards, grinding and scraping stones, arrowheads and spearheads. These artifacts, I was later told by the museum director in Timbuktu, dated back 5-10,000 years ago when man hunted large mammals that roamed the once lush Sahara.

Eventually, the brush and sparse wood totally vanished so we had to begin foraging for an alternate fuel source for our meager campfires.

The fuel alternative is sun-baked camel dung. Every day we had to gather it by fashioning aprons out of our *boubous*, long cotton robe-type shirts, then transferring it to a satchel tied to the source (the camel). The dung actually burned fairly well, especially with constant fanning. This became our sole source for cooking and heat for the remainder of the journey.





At 6-foot-1 and normally weighing around 185 lbs, I noticed I already had to pull my pant drawstrings tighter day by day. The lack of protein was taking its toll on my body.

Ten days into the trek we excitedly arrived at Araouane! This quaint adobe village is estimated to be older than Timbuktu and has a population of approximately 200 people. They have a one room school, a solar powered pump at one of their wells, a few scattered trees and a fenced off, incredibly sparse seedling tree farm. ('A' for effort!) Araouane is the only village in the whole region and a major stopping point for most caravans.

It remains a constant battle to keep the advancing sands from reclaiming the entire village which is situated among high dunes. In spite of the villagers' vigilance, many of the structures are either partially or even completely buried.



Lamana's sister and her family have a home there. Of course we were a welcome surprise to them and the hospitality extended was tremendous – beginning immediately with the tea!

We arrived just after sunset to the rhythmic beat of drums and high pitch sounds produced by the women as they manipulate their tongues in a celebratory ululating wail. It was the end of Ramadan and the young people were having a festival. I asked Lamana if we would be allowed to observe the festivities that were just over the next dune.

He said, "This is for the youth. It doesn't interest me."

When further pressed and cajoled, however, he acquiesced, "If Elhadje and you wish to go, go. There will be no problem, Insh'Allah." That's all we needed. As tired as we were, the chance to join in and be around a crowd of people after our days of isolation was irresistible to us both. We made





our way through the dark, following the drumbeat, whoops and laughter. As soon as we came into view of several dozen people ranging in age from 12 to 20-something, the music and dance came to an abrupt halt. This was unsettling as I immediately felt all eyes fixed upon me! After a moment of uncomfortable silence, they all rushed me, to my relief and delight, with open hands and smiles. Every one of them shook my hand or simply touched my arms. They began chanting for me to dance with them. A fast drum beat began and after some coaxing I danced solo as they formed a circle around me. Then a young woman joined me in the circle only to be replaced after a few moments by another, then another. So it went until I was so exhausted I fell breathless into the soft cool sands. The dancing continued on without me, but for me. It appeared I became the guest of honor! I felt completely relaxed and at ease with my new acquaintances. Within an hour, about ten p.m., the music and dance ended. Quick but meaningful goodbyes ensued, then everyone seemed to evaporate into the darkness.

We trekked back to Lamana's sister's home. To my surprise we set up our camp outside, just in front of her dwelling.

I was afraid perhaps it was because of me, but then I realized everyone slept outside to enjoy the cool night air. Araouane has a special feel about it. It's one of the rare places I've visited that has a certain, vibrant undercurrent, stimulating deeply buried ancestral memories. Its stark emptiness and timelessness feels full and alive due to the rich, yet simple, nature of its dwindling inhabitants.

The next morning we slept late, all the way to sunrise. This gave me a much needed re-charge. By this time my weight loss was becoming quite apparent. I desperately needed more protein. I decided to do an inventory of our food supply. We only had six tins of sardines and four tins of tuna left. There was plenty of couscous, rice, spaghetti, dates and nuts. Of course this was not enough to sustain my weight, nor my energy levels. I told Elhadje I would buy him and Lamana another goat if they could barter a chicken for me. Before lunch time, Lamana showed up with both. This was to be the best meal of my trip, specially prepared by the women of the house with only a pinch of sand!



Elhadje and I set off on a house-to-house mission to try to procure more canned foods. These half-buried adobe homes had no refrigerators, no electricity, no running water and most had only one locked chest of valuables, food and tobacco.



Despite all of that, we managed to purchase or trade tobacco for twelve tins of tomato paste, eight palm sized dried fish (that when re-hydrated smelled so bad none of us would eat them), two bags of stale crackers and one big bag of bubble gum and assorted candies. I knew I was in trouble at this point and would need to get aggressive with Lamana in order to keep him from eating what was left of my meager rations of fish.

Lamana declared we would spend one more night in Araouane so he could renew the camel's straw bumper/saddles and re-provision other items that should have been, but were not, provided by Ali.



I was happy to indulge in the simple but seemingly lavish comfort afforded by our hosts. I managed to have a luxurious bucket shower and a shave. One of the women of the household asked me if I would like her to wash my dirty clothes. Especially after showering, I was thrilled to give them to her.

As it turned out this very nice lady was a family slave. Slavery has been, supposedly, officially abolished for some years. Elhadje explained that after generations of a family belonging to a family they tend to stay as if they are part of it. In reality they have no work skills nor any place else to go. (On further investigation I found that Mali is still cited as one of the slave capitals of the world.) I felt a pang of guilt for her labors as she hand-washed my clothes so I slyly slipped her some CFAs.

We spent the afternoon in the cool confines of the sand-floored adobe home.





I played with the children, rested, and ate meager but well cooked meals. The well water was fresh enough that I never needed to clean out my pump. I purchased several goat skin satchels made by an old woman in the village. The ornate bags were hand-painted in colorful, intricate, geometric patterns. I also purchased, for my girlfriend, some beautiful antique stone beads that turned out to be thousands of years old. Later I had them strung with leather and fashioned into a bracelet. That night I set up the play station and showed a movie to a crowd of over a dozen. Their excitement of seeing a movie for the first time was almost tangible. I showed a fiction adventure movie called Sahara, the storyline based in Mali. With Elhadje doing his best to translate, it was a sure hit!

After seeing and wishing on at least 50 shooting stars that night, I happily drifted off to a deep sleep.

We awoke at four a.m., fulfilled all morning rituals, and departed by six. Several of Lamana's family members walked with us for

a few miles, which was the traditional proper send-off. When the sun began to rise we grouped together, shook hands, and they prayed for our safe and swift return.

Several hours into the day we encountered our first caravan coming from the salt mines. About 50 camels were each loaded with tombstone-sized slabs of salt. It was an impressive sight to see the Azalai escorting a double row of camels in the same way their ancestors had done generation after generation. I felt like I was in a time warp, transported back a thousand years.

Lamana left us to continue onward while he went over to greet the Azalai and give salutations. They didn't even slow their pace. They talked on the march, sharing news from home and information of conditions ahead, as they too must hurry from well to well, especially with the size of their caravan. Lamana greeted each member with a proud air about him as if he were an ambassador as he walked up their line.



The days continued on and what I had considered a barren landscape became even more desolate. Conversely, even the most subtle changes to the dry, moonscape-type terrain amplified a stark, yet intricate beauty. Without any dunes to break the winds, at times we were hit with gale-force sandstorms. A couple of mornings we woke up half buried in the wind swept sands. The nighttime temperatures, as promised, began to plummet. I finally had to wear warmer clothes and an overcoat while moonlight traveling. Lamana and Elhadje wrapped themselves in saddle blankets.

Sleep became elusive, and thus our afternoon breaks became a time for restless slumber hampered by stifling heat. Our poor diet, coupled with tainted water, was even taking its toll on Lamana and Elhadje. They became more irritable as they began having various intestinal issues. Lamana broke a tooth and exposed a painful nerve. Luckily I had packed a dental kit. Clove oil instantly gave him relief. I then offered to temporarily fill the break with tooth compound. He seemed grateful but remained silent.

I was in a different but no less uncomfortable condition. The soles of my feet were cracking badly. The thongs of my sandals, aggravated by sand, wore through the flesh between my toes causing relentless pain and continuous bleeding. Sunburned flesh was bordering on sun poisoning. My medical kit was getting a workout. I had packed enough medical gear and medicine to handle most emergencies; however, the deeper into the desert we traveled, the more problems we and the few people we encountered developed. Having a background in emergency medicine, I was able to fix many of the minor maladies afflicting us and our occasional Nomad guests, but I had to use the supplies sparingly in case of a major emergency.

With the waxing moon highlighting the desert floor, night vision was no longer a problem. I could comfortably negotiate most obstacles. As the moon became fuller, the more surreal my surroundings became. When dawn would approach, the large, vivid sinking moon teetered on the western horizon.



At the same instance, the budding sun balanced on the eastern horizon for what seemed to be an eternity. It felt as though time itself was suspended, until the sun overtook the moon, slowly, inconspicuously changing the direction of our elongated, silky shadow silhouettes.







As we plodded on deeper toward our destination, the landscape finally, abruptly changed. What appeared to be floating on a sea of sand were golf ball-sized rocks as far as the eye could see. It was a wonderful distraction from the visual monotony. A rainbow of pastel colors adorning the rocks was magnificent. As we continued on they became larger, more varied in shapes.

We began finding more superbly crafted spearheads, some of them the size of a large hand, like those proudly displayed in fine museums. The hunt for rocks and stone-age tools became a focal point for Elhadje and me. It gave us something to do: a treasure hunt! Lamana thought we were lunatics as we elatedly became fixated on our new diversion. The camels were definitely not as happy about the rocks as we were. When stepped on, they jab the soft flesh under their feet making them stumble, in turn creating a turbulent ride.

In time, food for the camels became non-existent. However, the large caravans take excess dried grass feed with them and stash huge quantities for their return trip. Lamana seemed to know all of the cache locations. He would innocuously appropriate a little from each pile we found, bundle and tie it to our camels.





I'm not sure what code of the desert this borrowing falls under but it sure felt like theft to Elhadje and me. We nervously joked about having our hands lopped off for stealing. With the feed tied to Lamana's lead camel, the other two were continuously trying to eat it. It was like a carrot on a stick dangling just in front of their noses – way too much of a temptation. Every time one would snatch a bite-full, Lamana would go crazy. Much to my dismay and useless protest, he would whack them with his riding stick. Even worse, he'd angrily throw a handful of sand into their mouths, which led to frequent camel revolts. They all reacted together against Lamana, in turn infuriating him even more. He would then tie their mouths closed with rope. They would go all day with the rope digging into their snouts, their lips turned inside out, breathing through their noses. I began berating Lamana, the meaning understood in any language. Elhadje begged me to stop as he felt Lamana would surely leave us to perish in the desert if I made him angry enough. I reluctantly respected Elhadje's opinion.

The harsh journey was taking its toll on all tempers.

I began to seriously doubt the true validity or value of this journey. To put man and beast at risk for personal entertainment, for my own whims to experience an endurance adventure, seemed shallow. I began to assess my other treks and rationalized that any time we humans explore (as we have always done), it puts people, animals and even environments at risk. One must weigh the potential harm and minimize as much as possible the inherent risks involved.

Once again the terrain changed from rock to low rolling dunes as we began to close in on our objective.

Lamana informed us we were only a couple of days from our destination, Taoudenni! This truly transformed all of our moods. Elated with this revelation we impatiently picked up our pace. I walked at about a third pace faster than the camels, confident I could continue northward by following previously made camel tracks. I was enjoying my solitude until I noticed several hours had passed. The winds picked up and began to blow the sands so hard, I couldn't see my small caravan. I had brought a couple of pints of water on my waist belt and only had one left. It was mid-day; the heat had reached its zenith, yet there was still plenty of time before dark. I rationalized they could be at most several miles behind me. Thus with a calculated risk I set off due west toward an elevated expanse of dunes, hoping to intersect them, Insh'Allah. Luckily, over two hours later, I spotted them heading on a northwesterly route. I was extremely thirsty, tired and relieved when I finally caught up with them. Elhadje was very excited to see me; apparently he had been quite worried. Lamana even showed a faint trace of relief. I decided from then on I would pay better attention and not wander too far. This was not the place to be unwise or rash.

The winds were so strong we decided to skip our afternoon break. We would never be able to start a proper fire nor erect a shelter under these conditions. The wind-blown sands actually blocked the intensity of the sun and, to our relief, cooled the day. Just before sunset Lamana pointed out a high, rugged rocky outcrop several miles ahead of us – a sand-covered spine running east and west with a break in the middle – the gateway to Taoudenni, ancient keeper of tale-told salt mines!



We made camp late in the evening. The wind continued its relentless attack.

We created a windbreak with our supplies in order to start a meager fire. It was time to break out my satellite phone and call Timbuktu. I had pre-negotiated to have a 4-wheel drive jeep pick us up the day we were to arrive in Taoudenni. We ate a scanty, sand-laden meal and then cocooned ourselves in our blankets to protect us from the raging sandstorm and the now biting cold. Sleep came easily considering the conditions. However, as I awakened in the morning I realized I was almost completely buried in the suffocating sands. The windbreak created an eddy, enabling the sand to dump directly on us. By the time we dug our selves out, packed and headed out, the winds had calmed. We were actually looking forward to the warmth of the day that lay ahead.

As we closed in on the “gateway” our camel tracks intersected and mingled with a *piste* (well worn track in the sand primarily made by motorized vehicles). Once again we increased our gait. Our objective was only hours away! Lamana stopped long enough to change into a new, clean outfit, equivalent to a Westerner’s Sunday best, so he could proudly make a grand entrance into the hobble town. I had some expectations from reading about Taoudenni; however,

what I was actually about to encounter I never could have fathomed. The dryness of the salt-scorched earth was foreboding. The temperature intensified as soon as we passed through the so-called gate (which I later dubbed “the gates to hell”). Moisture was sucked out of our pores like a vacuum had been attached to our skin. As if we were in a B-rated horror film, flies began to swarm upon us, increasing with every mile we rode.

Once close enough I could discern the town structures were made of discarded blocks of salt. Salt rock piles were strewn as far as the eye could see. Upon the piles, gaunt, ghost-like apparitions in flowing rag-tag robes began to appear. As word spread of approaching visitors, the curious gathered. Lamana dismounted to meet and greet our welcoming committee. He really was quite popular and respected by our hosts. He began enquiring about his nephew, Abdi, son of his sister, with whom we had stayed in Araouane. We were directed to his shanty located in the middle of the haphazard village. Every path and hobble looked the same among the rubble.

As we approached our final destination a small young man with a colossal smile came careening toward us, obviously overjoyed to have visitors, especially his uncle!



After the final camel unloading we were welcomed into Abdi's home. The sun's intensity directly above us made any shade a welcome necessity. Once inside the small domain it became apparent the flies felt the same way about shade. The salt structure was approximately 6 feet by 10 feet with only a tattered cloth for a door. Two mats, one on each side, gave a hopelessly thin barrier between our bodies and the ground. There was a candle for light but no other comforts except for a tea brazier. With no windows for ventilation and after the endless expanse we had just crossed, I immediately felt claustrophobic.

Etiquette dictated I should grin and bear it as long as the greetings and exchange of news from home ensued and of course, drinking of the tea. The flies were so thick the only air circulation was when someone would move and they would swarm, the flapping of thousands of wings actually fanning the room. I was so tired and hot I eventually just gave in to the misery of letting the flies land on my face. A strong wind was fairly constant outside so I decided to sustain 45 minute shifts standing outside in the brutal sun, then back to the flies.

As the news of a foreigner circulated the camp, miners began to gather outside, some just wanting to look and others seeking medical help or advice. They seemed to be under the impression that all Westerners are trained in medicine. This is due to the fact that most adventure travelers have at least some basic first aid knowledge. With my journey nearing its end, I decided I could

afford to deplete most of my medical kit. As I began treating the various injuries my knowledge and supplies could handle, I had to ask myself, "This is the romantic conclusion to Lawrence of Arabia, magic carpets, and incurably fascinating tales of old? This is the culmination of an adventurer's spirit in hot pursuit of the desert jinn?" The lofty dreams of finding genies were lost in the suffocating reality of wrapping appendages; the most common injuries were puncture wounds and worn-off skin, usually right down to their hand muscles from using various types of picks to extract and cut salt slabs from the earth. Infection from absolutely rampant insanitation was ubiquitous.

I guess it was only natural that conversation centered around physical needs; if 'the foreigner' knew first aid, the rationale was I could help a variety of maladies, some very serious. One man, it was said, had been given little hope. Although I'd never met him, his friend began, "You must help my friend. You must! He is dying! I heard you have a 4-wheel drive coming to deliver you to Timbuktu. How hard would it be to make room for a dying man? Transport a good man, save a good life." I sat and thought. With the closest doctor 500 miles back in Timbuktu, these people were living in the precarious backwaters of civilization. Sheer transportation logistics dictated that any serious problems must essentially go untreated at least until one of the infrequent large transport trucks would begin the long journey back to Timbuktu.

My heart went out and I allied myself to the friend's solicitation. Lamana and the others would hear nothing of it. "Are you crazy? He's too sick! The rough ride alone will surely kill him! He must wait for a large truck. You and Elhadje don't even know the ride you're in for!"

Impatient, riled up, his friend interrupted for the tenth time, "He's probably going to die anyway! If you leave him behind, there may be no hope at all!" Lamana had final say on all decisions and matters while we were alone in the desert. But now that we had transport coming, he could no longer exert his God-like hold over us. However, I still valued his skills and knowledge so I beseeched him, "Lamana, let's just let the drivers make the decision; that's not too much to ask?"

Moments passed. Finally we realized his silence was code for grudging assent.

Minutes turned to hours and it became apparent our return ride was either very late or not coming. I called back to Timbuktu and talked to Halise, the Taureg who had initially arranged my transport.

He seemed nonplussed. "Listen," he responded, "my two men left three days ago! They'll be there; don't worry!" Then, almost as an afterthought he added, "OK. I sent a satellite phone with them. I'll try to make contact and find out where they are. Just call me back in a couple hours?"





I knew how he'd end our conversation. "So, my friend, why not just plan on staying at least the night in Taoudenni." It was a declarative, not a question.

I knew I was in for a high dose of misery and would have to find a way to pass the time. Abdi sensed my consternation and offered a recommendation. "There are two men with a 4-wheel drive in camp. It's not in the greatest shape but why don't you at least try to find them and have a look? They may be hired to show you around the area and give you something to do while you wait."

"Well used" would be an understatement regarding the condition of this vehicle. Evidently these men would journey every few months from a neighboring country, called Western Sahara, with supplies to be bartered or sold to the miners. Their primary function was to drive to one of the two distant water wells at the miners' expense and fill 50-gallon industrial drums and guerbas with water. These two had a diabolical look about them as they held their cold, stony-eyed glare directly at me while sizing me up. They definitely gave Elhadje and me the creeps; both had an aura of killers about them. Nonetheless I made a deal with them.

"Can you just take us with you to the nearest well?" This happened to be located at an infamous derelict prison approximately an hour drive due east.



They secretively whispered to each other, possibly plotting our demise. One declared, “We will pick you up sometime tomorrow morning.”

After they left us Elhadje made it clear he was nervous about going with them. He was frank with me. “Are you sure? Are you crazy?”

I pointed out the fact that we were in Lamana’s protection and with his obvious status amongst the miners we should be safe.

He wasn’t reassured. Neither was I.

In the meantime, Abdi offered to take me to his salt mine and show me how they quarry the salt in the same manner their ancestors had done. The offer was irresistible. Besides seeing what I traveled so long and far for, was the added bonus of getting away from the claustrophobic enclave.

The mines were truly interesting! A stairway carved into the side of a large square open pit was around 40 feet by 40 feet and went down approximately ten feet. The sides were hand dug, almost perfectly vertical. At the bottom, low ceiling, horizontal shafts were dug in all directions stopping short of infiltrating a neighboring mine. We crouched very low and followed Abdi to the end of a four-foot-high shaft.







As my eyes adjusted to the dim light it dawned on me the primitive working conditions the miners endured. The saving grace was the temperature was much cooler and it was almost devoid of flies! Abdi seemed overjoyed at my obvious enthusiasm. He went right to work teaching me all about salt mining: I learned which were good and bad grades of salt and how to extract the huge slabs.

After thorough instructions I swung a crude hand made adze, an axe, at the layers of salt.

No success.



I didn't have the finesse it took to extract a slab intact as Abdi easily demonstrated no matter how hard I tried.

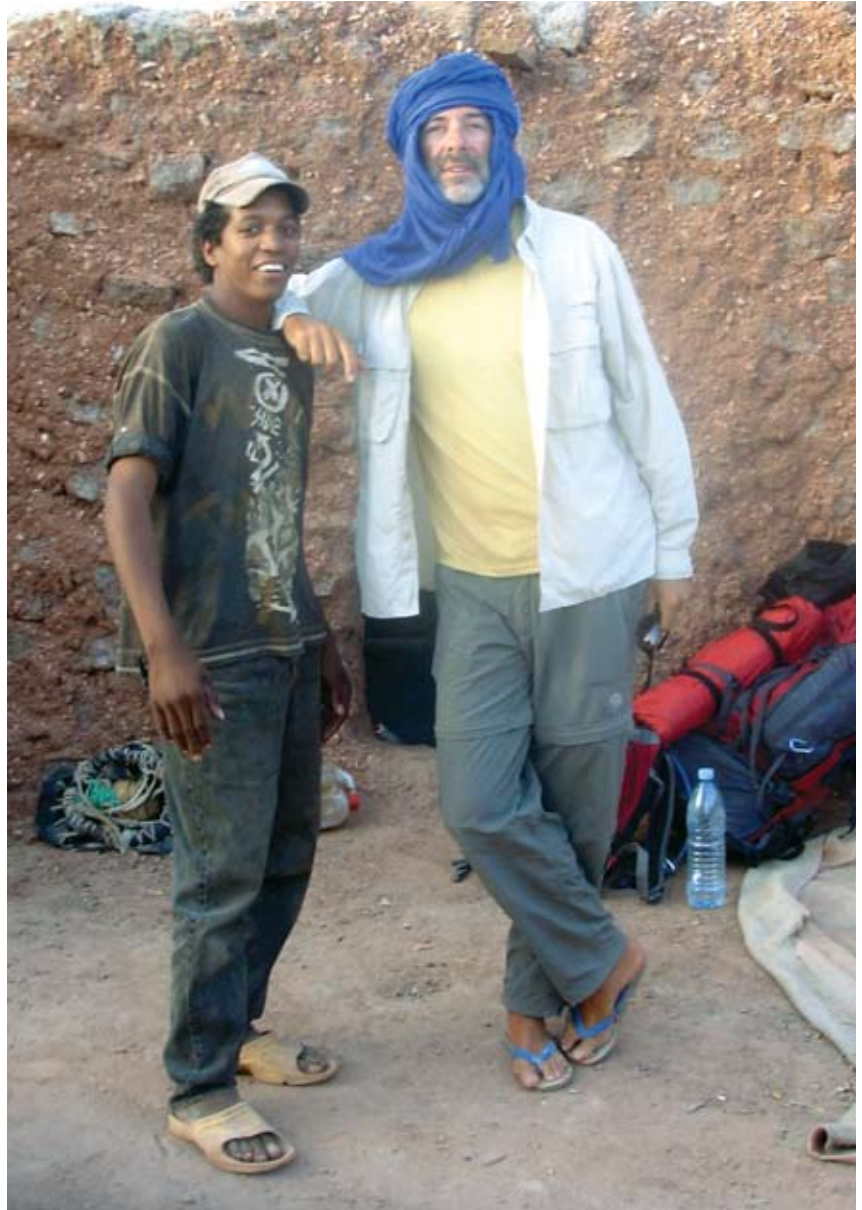
I don't mind hard work and am not new to mining. I have a gold claim in California I enjoy working on a recreational level. But, it pales to the back wrenching work and lung choking gasps from the fine salt dust floating in the still, stale air of the pit.

It gave me a huge dose of respect for these hardy souls who toil here for a mere couple hundred of dollars per year. There are no women or children in Taoudenni as there once was. Because of the poor conditions and health hazards, Abdi said they have been banned since sometime in the late 1960s. It's a town of only men. They work in Taoudenni for six months to a year to raise money for their families and for some, such as Abdi, the hope of saving enough CFAs for a marriage dowry. As with most people I've met in poor Third World countries they seem, in spite of their conditions, relatively happy and have dreams and aspirations as most people do. The human spirit can thrive even here.

As evening set in we went back to Abdi's home for tea, visiting and food. His home had three walls surrounding it to form a wind break, in turn creating a courtyard.

This was where we all would sleep. While we were eating and thoroughly enjoying each others' company I noticed a few small rats scurrying about the courtyard. I knew I was in for a bad night but on the bright side, at least with the dusk, the flies had settled down.

I arranged myself in the corner of the courtyard hoping the rats wouldn't have enough maneuvering room in the tight corner to bother me too much. However, I failed to notice a small hole in the salt-adobe wall directly behind my head. After the grueling physical intensity of reaching our final goal, the three of us, in sync, allowed ourselves the luxury of shutting down and crashing. Sleep came fast, as if I had been drugged.





I barely felt an intermittent sharp gnawing at my scalp. I finally pulled myself out of my stupor when I felt something creeping about my face. As I sprang up I saw the vermin scurry right over Elhadje's face and in turn, over Lamana's. Repulsed? Yes, but I was so tired I couldn't stay awake; hence, every time I fell back asleep the gnawing would begin again. What a night! The heat of the day and the relentless attack of the flies began to seem like a better alternative. In the morning Elhadje went on an incensed rat revenge hunt.

By the time the now fabled "killer Saharans" arrived to collect us, needless to say, we were really eager to go. I was given the seat of honor, right in the middle of the truck cab between the sly-eyed killers! With the promise of a bucket shower I happily risked my fate. They drove as fast as they could through the soft piste, creating a harrowing ride. At one point we missed a curve and careened off the track landing in soft sand on two wheels, a near roll-over. Somehow no one flew out of the pick-up bed. *Alhamdulillah* (Thank God) for centrifugal force!

After an hour or so the ruins of the prison came into view. It was a maudlin site to behold.





It is located in probably the most remote, inhospitable place on earth. It must have surely been to its captives the one and only true Hades. Once convicted and sent to Taoudenni it was most likely a slow and cruel death sentence. The prisoners were mandated to mine salt and most succumbed to the horrific conditions. Even the guards fared poorly, evidenced by walking through the two graveyards just north of the prison. The prison was active until 1991 and, in fact, held many political prisoners.





The eeriness of the half buried walls, broken barb wire, barren buildings and armored troop carriers under a sea of sand waves, coupled by the silence, save for the whistling winds gave me a forlorn, haunting feeling that their tortured souls are still about. (I think Lamana's genie stories were affecting me, as the hair on the back of my neck prickled!)

The well was a large, open, hand dug cavern. The water was hauled up by hand in a metal bucket by a couple of miners the Saharans brought along with us to do the manual labor in trade for a free guerba of water. It took a couple of hours to fill their quota – time enough for a bucket shower I took in one of the wind-swept old prison cells. The water from the well looked more like the waste of some malevolent science experiment, and was so briny and unpalatable that I questioned any rational human's consumption of the substance.



We returned to Abdi's, throats intact, mid-afternoon. Still no vehicle had arrived. I began to mentally prep myself for another long night. Then just before twilight, to my delight I saw a pick-up truck racing towards us. It was our transport!

The driver, Mahmoud, it turned out, was a man I had met with his children a month earlier in Timbuktu. Not just transport but a familiar face! He had with him another man, Alhadji, who was his navigator. They showed us two blown out inner tubes that had stopped them dead in their tracks. It delayed them by an entire day. How they replaced them I still don't know.



Of course, as I anticipated, they wanted to stay the night in Taoudenni and leave late the next morning so they could rest up and make some more repairs to the truck. It then struck me; it was a truck! A tight squeeze for three in the cab, with the added awkwardness of the gear shift positioned un-strategically for the middle passenger. The small truck bed was over-filled with two 55-gallon drums of fuel and a plethora of supplies.

Lamana had spent the whole day trying to find a caravan returning to Timbuktu that would take his camels so he could ride back with us. I had always assumed he would load the camels with salt and earn extra money via the return trip. I was relieved he had every intention of avoiding the even slower return trip with the caravans. He didn't want his camels to carry the sometimes fatal loads nor did he seem up to the grueling trip himself. I offered to help finance someone taking the camels with the promise of not working them. I especially worried about his camel, my now fond friend.





I asked Mahmoud about taking the sick man with us. He didn't even hesitate with his refusal. He said after the three of us took turns riding in the back I would understand why it could not be possible. After a thorough inspection I was fairly convinced he was right. We were definitely in for a high speed dose of misery! I made it clear that at least I wanted to be driven out of Taoudenni to the other side of the gates of hell to camp in the sterile desert that night. He didn't want to waste the fuel but relented when he heard the pleading sound of Elhadje's own request.

We began to pack up, leaving Abdi with any extra provisions we could afford to do without. Much to our delight, my friend Halise sent a couple of coolers of perishables on ice for us! Real food, fresh fruit, bottled water and even (for me, the non-Muslim infidel) some beers!! Abdi asked if we could send a note for his family. I did one better and video taped him with a live message especially for his mother. Eyes brimming, he was clearly grateful.

About 50 people gathered as we bade our final goodbyes and departed. Lamana stayed behind for the night with Abdi. Mahmoud took us far off the so called beaten path for security reasons. We unloaded our supplies and the precious coolers; he then left us with Alhadji (the navigator) and promised to return before morning. No more flies, rats or other insidious creatures that host off humanity. We were back to a dead sea of sand but this time with provisions! It took me no time at all to crack open one of the beers. The cold, bitter fluid bit at the back of my parched throat and gave me an ecstatic feeling not easily replicated in this life. I bit into a hard green orange that sent me into a euphoric sensory overload. Seldom have I enjoyed so much the simple gastronomic pleasures I was now (after deprivation) experiencing!

After a short rest I determined this was a good place to release







Salt caravan emerging from sandstorm.

some of my mother's ashes. I had promised her I would scatter her DNA across the furthest reaches of the world. This unquestionably qualified as one of them! I threw a pinch of sand into the air to ensure the wind was blowing hard and steady away from the hellish Taoudenni before releasing her ashes to the heavens.



Both Elhadje and Alhadji observed my simple ceremony in quiet reverence and, I believe, in appreciation of this foreign ceremony.

I felt as though we had been delivered into the lap of luxury compared to Taoudenni. Elhadje and I went about the business of setting up our camp for the night. Again the winds began their relentless assault, sandblasting everything in its path. I remembered reading that during World War II the British found out the hard way that their khaki uniforms, consisting of shorts and short sleeved shirts, were no match for the Saharan sands. Any exposed skin was painfully stripped off by the strongest sand storms.

Thanks to the protection of my indigenous clothing and the beers, I was able to quickly fade off into a deep sleep until about four a.m. when the vehicle returned. Again, digging out of the suffocating sands was required. As I emerged from being cocooned in my saddle blanket I felt like a newborn, cast into the now cool, still night.

I was beginning a new segment of my (now to be) short journey home.

Without the camels, loading up was a cinch. I thought I would be happy to abandon them, but a deep feeling of separation anxiety had already crept in. I missed my friend!

I volunteered to begin the return journey in the back of the pick-up along with Elhadje allowing Lamana to have my seat of honor in the cab. (Age before beauty?) As we picked up speed

it felt like I was in an Indy car, or at least in the infamous Dakar Rally. After weeks of traveling no faster than a walk, the speed was mind-numbing. The driver sped through the sands at up to 75 mph, actually for practicality's sake: If you slow down you can get bogged down in sand drifts.

At these speeds Elhadje and I had to hang on for dear life. We were being flung around with the other various supplies in the truck bed, occasionally being tossed up like rag dolls, then landing hard on the edge of the 55-gallon steel drums or smashing down into any of the other menacing items bouncing about. Third point for modern technology: I inflated my trusty air mattress that now doubled as a vehicle airbag, offering backrest and protection from the hard steel drums, flying firewood and supplies. Now I clearly understood why it was impossible to take the sick man with us. I wasn't sure I would even survive this ride. It was the equivalent of compressing our three week camel trek into three days!

Periodically, Lamana and I traded off the misery of enduring the cramped, stuffy confines as the third person in the cab, in exchange for the wild bronco ride in the truck bed. It was the same as wishing to be walking while camel riding, and wishing to be riding when walking!

We were back to Araouane within two days. Everyone was very happy for our safe return, especially Abdi's mother as she viewed her son's video-letter. After playing doctor a few more times and re-supplying with precious Araouane water, we bade our final goodbyes and were off.



The next evening Timbuktu appeared against the horizon like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. It appeared bigger than life as we rolled into the city proper. What felt like one of the most remote towns on earth now seemed to be a hustling, bustling metropolis. I checked into the best hotel in town – for Timbuktu a 5 Star, for us a 2.2. Immediately I made friends with the chef and had a marvelous dinner followed by a very long shower. I recuperated for a few days enjoying the hospitality of all my new friends and the few creature comforts Timbuktu had to offer. I then caught a flight back to Bamako, Mali’s capitol, and departed for home the next day. (Airplane food was like an oasis in the desert!)

Although I never was able to mount a camel with fluid (or even proficient) grace, the journey’s memories of pain, anguish and humility were already beginning to pale as the hours rushed past. I once again entered the proverbial fast lane. I lost a total of thirty pounds on the journey, mostly muscle. Of course, this could have been prevented had I insisted on the supply inspection. I also should have had the foresight to bring along individual serving packets of protein powders available in any health store in the States. It will take me several months to regain the weight I lost and to get back to peak health. Of course I live by the mantra “What doesn’t kill you gives you good stories!” So as I now re-gain my strength I will begin to plot and plan my next adventure. Hot? Cold? Outer-space? Hmmmm....



Ron's adventures have taken him to the tops of mountains and through raging waters. His camel-back journey through the Saharan Desert is one few people attempt. There are four-wheel drive excursions and short guided tours in various areas of the Sahara, but Ron endured the same journey made for thousands of years by men who hauled salt from the mines of Taoudenni to market.

In spite of his efforts to be well provisioned, Ron was dependent upon a man from Timbuktu to make the arrangements for the food and meager supplies that would have to sustain him and his party for over three weeks in one of the most hostile and unforgiving environments on earth.

Ron and his interpreter, Elhadje, placed their lives in the hands of their guide, Lamana. They had to rely on him for their survival: protection from the elements and thieves, finding the wells along their route three or four days apart, and communicating with Nomads they encountered along the way.

He exposed himself to the risks inherent in traveling through an extremely harsh desert environment, the least of which was the poor quality of the water found in the desert wells along the way. The few Western items and medicine he was able to bring along did more to comfort the Nomads they met along the way than Ron.

Cameleers band together in caravans for protection during the torturously long trips with camels loaded to or beyond their load bearing capacity with large slabs of salt. By choice, Ron didn't have the security of riding in a caravan. It was just three men on a perilous journey – an adventure of a lifetime.