

Magnificent Mali



JOURNEY TO A FESTIVAL



At the Mosque in Timbuktu

Story and all photos by Felicia Kelly

My personal love of Africa began with the beckoning of a song. Artists including Baaba Maal, Lokua Kanza and Richard Bona called out with voices and instruments urging me to follow their melodies to a magical place. As the soaring vocals of Salif Keita dance atop the multi-rhythmic layers of enchanting music, I feel spiritually transported through

song to a place deep within and it was in this context I felt a need to travel to Africa.

With an excited phone call from a dear friend, Leni Stern, I committed to traveling to a country so exotic it seemed a mythical mirage of my mind. As a longtime festival attendee to gatherings from California to Ethiopia, the lure of attending a festival billed as the “most remote music festival on earth” inspired me so I had to find a way to make it happen.

The event driving my quest was the Festival in the Desert (www.festival-au-desert.org), held for the past six years in Essakane,

an outlying desert site nearly two hours outside Timbuktu. This unique event organized by the Tuareg people of the region, showcases music from Mali, Niger and Mauritania including artists such as Tinarwiren, Habib Koite and Khaira A’rby. This



Children gather to see the “toubobs” at our tire stop.

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event provided an opportunity to experience the roots of reggae at the source. Though reggae is uniquely evolved from mento, ska and rocksteady, it is clear that the underlying rhythms providing the foundation are African in origin.

So the planning began: flights, immunization, festival tickets, etc. With great luck, my longtime friend from Mali, Solo Traore, generously offered the guidance and assistance of his family. This proved to be the most important link to the ancient land of Mali, home of musical greats such as Oumou Sangare, Ali Farka Toure and Amadou and Mariam.



From the moment we arrived, the excitement eclipsed the complete exhaustion of a nearly 36-hour journey. Many people flying from Paris were in fact traveling to Mali for the festival. The first few days of our trip were spent in Bamako, the capital city. Despite the dust and pollution of the city, the vibe was upbeat yet relaxed. Unable to speak French, with new-found friends (Solo's nephew and sister), Ousman and Safi, I was able to navigate the ultra-congested back alleys of the fabric markets and check out all of the amazing foods in the market. The upcoming Muslim holiday of Tabaski (Festival of the Sacrifice – based on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son for Allah) was looming, sending people scurrying to secure provisions and gifts as they headed en masse to their villages to celebrate with family.

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After two days, we had secured ground transportation to the festival. Now we would spend the next eight days traveling up the country, setting our eyes on many of the treasures of Mali. This would be the most extensive preparation for a festival that I had experienced yet. The festival itself would provide the tent and a mat, but all else was ours to forage. A four-wheel drive is both a luxury and a necessity to make this journey. We lucked out with a knowledgeable and skilled driver, Kalifa.

Our first destination was the great mosque at Djenne. Our journey proved longer than anticipated and after 10 hours of driving, we arrived at the river crossing. With twilight setting, the dusk enveloped our view and cast mystical shadows across the dusty courtyard surrounding the great mosque.



Tuareg man

The mosque at Djenne is the largest mud structure in the world and many consider it the most beautiful. The present day mosque, a classic Sudanese design was constructed in 1907 on the base of King Koy Konboro's original Mosque. With two entrances, both north and south, the entire structure sits three meters above ground with six symbolic stairs on the northern entrance. These six stairs represent the transition from the profane to the sacred. Unfortunately, no infidels are allowed inside, therefore the artistic internal realms are expressly for the pleasure of Muslims.

The next two days were dedicated to exploring Dogon country. From Mopti through the Bandiagara, we set out in search of remote dwellings and unique people. The first day of our arrival, Tabaski was taking place, so many shops and places were closed for one of the most important and universally celebrated Muslim holiday (also known as Eid). For a vegetarian, this is not the most welcoming event because sheep are being slaughtered in nearly every home in the country.

The topography of the land began to change as we drove through the escarpment. None of the villages in Dogon country are located very near to roads so one must be prepared to hike in the stone country to have encounters with the elusive and mystical

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Our greeter in Pay Dogon

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Dogon people. On our stop, which wasn't too far out of the town of Mopti, we encountered a wonderful village with abundant agriculture in the surrounding lowlands. Their system of irrigation created a lush layout of onions and other vegetables. The neat, clean village had all of the traditional structures that I read about in my pre-journey preparation.

After a second day, we set off with our sites on the desert. This day we would journey for eight hours across the desert to Timbuktu. One of the greatest challenges from the time we began our "pilgrimage" was the incredible dust that infiltrated the car throughout the whole journey. The traditional face coverings are a basic necessity to stave off chronic sinus infections and respiratory ailments. Any traveler with destination Mali, will be miles ahead to have some light cotton scarves to use during travel. While we were in a private vehicle, the need increases with use of open-aired public transportation.

While much of the journey to Timbuktu was paved, the further north we were, the rougher the roads became. Shortly before we arrived at the last village before heading onto the roadless desert, we had a flat tire. Luckily, we had a spare and we were able to stop and purchase a new tire – the first of three – before the car landed back in Bamako.

We arrived at the river crossing to Timbuktu just as the sun was setting. There was a short queue of cars, nothing that would foreshadow our two-hour wait. With ferries able to take only four cars at a time, we thought we would be on the second boat to arrive. As all things are in Africa, everything depends on who you know and how you state your case. We had cars speed through the sand and cut us off as we were about to drive on the boat and then, lo and behold, the Minister of Culture and his entourage arrived and we were pushed back yet again. The sun had fallen and tensions were growing with our need to get across the river. My travel partner Leni ended up losing the contents of her wallet including her American Express card. You can imagine our shock and the subsequent conversation calling American Express and explaining to an operator with a pronounced southern drawl that your card was lost in Timbuktu: TV commercial waiting to made.

At last we arrived at our hotel in Timbuktu, Hotel Hendrina Khan. Our ability to find accommodations on the days before the festival was nothing short of a miracle. The man who ran the hotel proved to be invaluable in facilitating the coming day's journey.



Best seat in the house!



Majestic Tuareg on his camel

He offered sleeping bags for the festival – a necessity that some in our group didn't have – and a place to return before our departure. Due to the intensity of the overland drive, we opted to fly back to Bamako and forego the dusty return.

Waking up in the morning was like walking through a portal in time. As I peered out my window, I was met with sand and images of camel caravans navigating the alleys of Timbuktu. Little did I know what lay ahead as we drove through the sands of time to Essakane.

We decided to meet up with the festival organizers and travel with their caravan to the festival site. Driving through the desert without any roads can be a challenge, especially when one isn't familiar with the navigational landmarks. Despite the fact that we started in the caravan, we were put off by the overloaded trucks getting stuck in the sand and came to make a decision that we would regret. We took off on our own with our Tuareg guide, Dahmane, leading the way – clearly not the most prudent decision – as we ended up getting lost in the desert and getting stuck in the sand. Thank God (Mash' Allah) that desert etiquette leaves no traveler unattended and a truck of Tuaregs came to our rescue, leading us in the right direction.

As we arrived at the festival, we were met by low-lying tents scattered throughout. Given a choice of where to make our resting place, we chose a camel skin tent set off by a bit of a sand dune we thought might keep us sheltered from the foot traffic. The tent was open in the front but large enough to accommodate at least five people. With our sleeping mats in hand, we set up home base only to discover the reality of the desert burrs known as "kram krams." Kram krams were our nemesis for days to come and something every desert traveler should anticipate. They infiltrated every piece of clothing and everyone's feet. I spent hours with my tweezers extracting tiny pieces of nearly invisible needles of nature. For the duration of the trip, I kept pants on under my dresses and hiking boots on my feet. There were to be no flip flops in the sand or these desert visitors would latch on like illegal hitchhikers.

The festival was amazing! The setup was well executed and the lineup provided an ethereal backdrop for this transcendent experience. Daytime offered camel races and other contests, showcasing feats and skills indigenous to the region as well as opportunities to wander through the encampments witnessing daily rituals as old as the sand we stood upon.

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Festival in the Desert stage

Surrounded by traditional music playing all night long and the electrified N'goni's resonating from the main stage, I can say that I found a slice of heaven in that sand. As the traditional stage morphed into a late-night dancehall, the pulsating reggae rhythms rang out across the sands bringing my love and musical appreciation full circle.

The reflection of the full moon lit up the desert night and the extreme temperature fluctuations required layers upon layers of clothing. Words can never describe or convey the feelings I had looking out across the sea of festival attendees wrapped from head-to-toe enjoying the music.

God Willing, I will make the sojourn to Mali again next year. The lure of Timbuktu looms ever present in my imagination. Every time I close my eyes, I see visions of camels and their regal masters, feet-upon-the-neck making the long trek though the desert to gather and celebrate their rich friendships and culture. Perhaps next time, I will scan the crowd only to discover your eyes peering out from the traditional blue headwraps. ♡

Felicia Kelly resides in Los Angeles and works for WEA Distribution as Regional Sales Manager for the catalog and Rhino Records. Her career includes stints at Shanachie Records, Koch Distribution and Palm Pictures. Her love of music is rivaled only by her passion for travel. Highlights of her past travels include journeys to India, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. She can be reached at fil1luv@earthlink.net.