

# Grand Raid Expedition in Sahara Desert / Mali

## *From the salt mines of Taudenni to the Savanna*

Timbuktu is the departure point of this expedition.

We will follow the tracks of the last big caravan route, traveling from Timbuktu to the legendary salt mines of Taudenni. Off road, the exploration journey takes us out to the legendary R'Gaybat nomad group, considered one of the most remote populations of the Sahara. We reach the Adrar des Iforas, a massif of mountains which hosts ancient graffiti and rarely visited Tuareg camps. In this region we will discover the site of Es Souk, an ancient and mysterious village, center of the caravan trade. After a long crossing among the silent Saharan spaces, we arrive at the Niger River. The big river brings rhythms, smells and the vibrant colors of Africa: big pirogues, fisherman villages, sandy alleys and walls in clay, children's faces, women's voices and the sounds of the tam-tam.

## Itinerary

### **1st day:** Bamako

Arrive in Bamako the capital of Mali, airport assistance and transfer to the hotel.

### **2nd day:** Timbuktu and the Sahara (Bamako – Timbuktu – Sahara)

Check in for our flight to Timbuktu. Arrive about Noon! The 4x4 vehicles are waiting for us at the airport, where we will start our great expedition. Overnight camping on the dunes.

### **3rd day:** Araouane, village among the dunes (Sahara – Araouane)

Araouane is the only village along this caravan route, inhabited since the XI century by salt traders belonging to the Bedouin group of Ouled Sidi Hammed. The houses in banco are covered by the sand of the dunes to the top of the walls. The caravan trade is the only activity of this village. Between October and May, a lot of salt-charged caravans travel to Timbuktu. We are received by the Amenokal, the chief of the village with whom we have a friendly relationship. Overnight on the dunes.

### **4th day:** Azalai, the salt caravan (Sahara)

Off road, we meet caravan marks only and we arrive at Fom El Alba that means "the door of the dunes". Not to lose our way, we need to find "the door" of the right passage among the sand labyrinth. Fom El Alba is the meeting point of caravans coming from Timbuktu, from Mauritania and the mountains of Iforas. From centuries,

the caravans meet here exchanging information about wells, the salt rates and the movement of the desert bandits.

In the Ougla plain the nomads know where they can find water digging out the sand with their hands. Bufelghia means "the whole among the tooth" and it points out a passage among the rocks. The Azalai (the salt caravan) of Taudenni is considered today the most active among the Saharan salt caravans. We meet very long camel lines charged by salt bars and lead by some men wearing exclusively indigo dresses. This type of dress keeps them cool in the hot Saharan sun.

### **5 & 6 day:** Taudenni

Crossing the chain of dunes of El Allus, our arrival in Taudenni is impressive. Looking to the horizon, you see something, what is it? It's the salt mines and hundreds of camels waiting to be charged.

Taudenni: a space to the border of reality where hundreds of miners, coming from the region of Gao and Timbuktu, collect salt bars from the bottom of big rectangular wholes. They are no more slaves or prisoners belonging to the Harratin, they worked as miners for generations and they stay in this area for six months per year. All around this working "salt hell", the Sahara spreads without breaks over thousands of kilometers. From the desert, every day, for centuries, caravans come to look for a salt charge. Also the small miner houses are built using salt blocks. This region produces the best quality salt in all of Western Africa.

### **7th, 8th:** Encampments (Taudenni – Sahara)

Back, following the track of the Azalai... meeting caravans... spending time with nomads in their encampment..., enjoying life around wells...

### **9 day:** The City of legend, Timbuktu)

Nevertheless, Timbuktu is still a myth.

## **A myth can be disappointing.**

**In the XIX cent:** « I looked around and found that the sight before me did not answer my expectations. I had formed a totally different idea of the grandeur and wealth of Timbuktu... » (René Caillié)

**In the XX cent:** "For some people, when you say 'Timbuktu, it is like the end of the world, but that is not true. I am from Timbuktu, and I can tell you we are right at the heart of the world." (Ali Farka Toure)

Better to undress all the expectations and to walk in the sandy streets... Djinguereber Mosque, built in the 14th century, the oldest clay building in Africa, ... houses in clay and gray stones arriving from the area surrounding the city... small markets with few dry vegetables, some slabs of salt, a lot of leather crafts.

At sunset the sky is still « pale red as far as the horizon » like at the Caillié's time and the town regains the vivacity that it has never lost. Rich merchants, elegant women, smiling kids walk in the street and socialize. Timbuktu is still today the major "caravan terminal" of the Sahara, beyond any postcard cliché.

**10 day: Blues (Timbuktu – Nianfounke)**

On the way to Nianfounke rounded Bella huts and open Tuareg tents appear as a dot on the horizon. The presence of various archeological sites like small hills with big terraces jars and tombs, stand as mysterious testimonials of populations that lived in this region in the past.

The landscape becomes more and more green offering good conditions for farming. Rice plantations surround Nianfounke, enabling the town to provide food to the rest of the region.

Nianfounke is small town, with administrative buildings, like the Governors siege and the District Commandant house, built by the French colonial administration. The French were the supporters of the "Sudanese Style" called also "Neo Moresco". Widely inspired at the local architecture, this colonial Sudanese Style is an interesting attempt to integrate the architecture of those years with the African style in order to respond to the climatic and aesthetic needs of those countries. Nianfounke is also the cradle of African blues, inspired by Ali Farka Toure and his court of musicians.

**11th and 12th day: The Big River (Nianfounke – Mopti)**

Two days of navigation on the River on a big covered pinasse, (local large pirogue) through the most interesting part of the internal delta of the Niger River. In this region at the edge between savannah and desert the immense water basin is divided into hundreds of branches, lakes and ponds: a vast "spider web". Villages are inhabited by Fulani, Bozo and Songhay, some reachable only by pirogue. Beautiful adobe architecture strikes the eye: the mosques with a "personalized" style in each of the ethnic groups... the homes built along the water courses... the tiny fishermen shelters on small islands... the rangy canoes with a unique shape. Halfway, the river turns into the huge lake Debo: a paradise for fishermen and shepherds. The shallow water hosts enough fish to feed the region. The area is abundant with birds, some of them coming from Europe to escape the winter. At sunset millions of weavers fly in flocks, composing strange figures. They are "dancing" in the sky.

**13: River Harbour (Mopti – Djenne)**

The town of Mopti is built on three islands where the Bani and Niger rivers converge. The town is alive with the different cultures in the region: Bozo fishermen, Dogon, Bambara and Bella farmers, Tuareg and Peul shepherds. The market and the harbor are saturated with magnificent colors and smells.

Part of the harbor is occupied by a traditional workshop. Artisans make up the "pinasse", starting with the production of sails and finishing with colorful paintings on the sides of the boats.

As trade point Mopti is important also for art objects from the region, including a great variety of beads and jewelry. **Transfer to Djenne:** Djenne is the most beautiful and genuine example of Sudanese adobe architecture in the area

**13th day DJENNE:** Hotel Maafir, air conditioned rooms with toilet facilities Koranic schools, the mosque -that is also the biggest building made out of clay in the world

## **Day 14:** Djenne – Segou

In Djenne, some details deserve special attention: the technique used to build the roofs, the setting of the rooms in the houses, the Morocco style windows, the Toucouleurs gates, the rounded and the square bricks dating way back in time.

In Djenne we understand that a mason can be an artist. These artists, here in Djenne, are called "barrey". They work just with their hands, no tools, like sculptors. To build a house like an artist, to protect it like a priest. Here is a "barrey". No way to understand Djenne without crossing the path of one of them.

Transfer to Segou.

Founded in 1852, Segou, keeper of one of the most ancient histories of West Africa, capital of the ancient Bambara kingdom, has an undeniable charm which is well worth discovering. Ancient kingdom of culture and tradition, Segou has inspired numerous writers and historians. Among the most famous is Maryse Condé. Segou is also the site where Mungo Park, the first European in modern times, gazed upon the Niger River. When he arrived he 'fell to his knees, thanked God, and drank from the muddy water.

## **15th day:** Bamako (SEgou – Bamako out)

Bamako, the capital.

The administrative buildings have the marks of beautiful Neo-Sudanese style. The museum is the best ethnographic museum in West Africa. Its great collection displaying the beauty of African shapes contains ancient art objects of astonishing beauty. We will admire masks, ritual sculptures, archeological terracotta, textiles, musical instruments, tools, and traditional weapons...

We will also visit the traditional blacksmiths.

Time to get ready for the departure. Day-use rooms will be available  
Transfer to the airport.

## **Overnight:**

### **1st day BAMAKO:**

Plaza Hotel, air conditioned rooms. International standard

### **9th day TIMBUKTU:**

Hotel Azalai or similar, air conditioned rooms with toilet facilities

### **12th day MOPTI:**

Hotel Ambedjele, or Kanaga, air conditioned rooms with toilet facilities

### **13th day DJENNE:**

Hotel Maafir, air conditioned rooms with toilet facilities

### **14th day SEGOU:**

Hotel Auberge, air conditioned rooms with toilet facilities

### **15th day BAMAKO:** Day-use rooms available

All other overnights are in the mobile tented camp

## **Transportation:**

4x4 vehicles equipped for off-road hard crosses. Pick-up vehicle 4x4 as logistic assistance. Local drivers with good knowledge of Saharan experiences, mechanic, GPS for satellite sailing. Military escort in some areas

Pinasse (motor boat)

Minibus from Mopti to Bamako

### **Guide:**

Steve Krenzen will be the trip leader; his duties will be enhanced by our local staff that is all based in Timbuktu. Steve's crew are all locals, they are all from the Timbuktu area and are very experienced with all aspects of desert travel. English speaking local guide.

### **Vaccinations:**

Yellow fever requested.

Prophylaxis anti malaria recommended

### **Camping:**

The cooperation of clients is appreciated.

Overnight in tropical modern tents

### **Meals:**

During the camping the meals will be arranged by a professional cook of the organization.

Picnic style cold lunch and hot meals for dinner. The meals are complete and integrated by fresh food wherever it will be possible. Italian, French and Tuareg cuisine. During the dinner quality wines will be served.

**Climate:** Hot tempered during the day, cold during the night

**Visa:** Mali entry visa is required

The itinerary, dates, overnights and visits could be changed, modified or cancelled for major reasons at the discretions of the organization only.

**Rates**

The rates are on full board basis and they include the domestic flights  
Bamako-Timbuktu

**For a group of minimum 6 people**

Per person sharing a double room/tent: 3889 euros

**Single supplement:** 299 euros

The rates do not include international flights, the meals in Bamako, all the drinks, visas.

**NOTE: The Tanzania and Mail trips will run back to back for those interested in both!**

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