

MALI
MAY 2010
By Karen Hauptfleisch

1 May: After 9 hours of traveling, the guy behind me coughing constantly, we finally arrived in Mopti at 06h00. The heat was overwhelming and I was swollen twice my normal size and as usual, full of dust. Ten minutes later, we were on another bus – back to Sevare, where we were supposed to have gotten off.

A heavenly shower at the motor park followed, and my sense of humour re-emerged. We were told the bus would leave at 14h00. Abraham, a guide from Timbuktu advised us to take Kola Nuts with, so we bought a whole bag full. It was Rasta day and everyone was in a good mood. Just as we were leaving the motor park to visit a bank, we were stopped and escorted to another bus where a fight about our luggage broke out. After a while, peace was restored and we were shown to the back seats, and the luggage was fastened behind us. At last, a nice, although loose seat. I also had a window that could open.



Another day in Africa

It was hot but I enjoyed the little breeze coming through the window – until the guy in front of me started to puke, and everything came flying through the open window. I got a bit hysterical.

A quick lunch break 160 km further followed but it was too hot so I got back on the bus. The scenery up till here were sad, but suddenly the scene changed and kilometers of mountains followed, with the only backdraw the guy in front still car sick and the luggage behind us falling on top of us. Several mistaken spottings of Fatima's hand followed and by the time we finally reached Hombori at 18h00, 12 hours after we started, we were too scared to take another guess.

The owner of Chez Lelele and his family welcomed us with open arms and set off looking for Amadou, our guide. Alan and I rushed to the garage, looking for anything cold to drink since the 12 liter of water we brought with us was almost boiling. The coldest I could find was luke warm, which had to do. Supper was spaghetti, luke warm coke and mangoes. Anything for some energy. I needed a plan to cool the 6 liters of water I had to take with me the next day on the climb. Sleeping on the roof was my only option. It was a long evening trying to sleep in the heat. You could not use the drinking water since it was too hot and the expected breeze around 24h00 never came, but a small dust storm did.



The guest house

12 May: I was up by 3h30 and Amadou arrived at 5. The hike to the mountain was fantastic, he wanted to rest but remembering the heat; I pushed on, not knowing what to expect and thinking we would be back in 4 hours. I was surprised to see fixed ropes on top, a bit disappointed but also glad it was not too daunting. I was given 2 slings with carabineers and shown how it is done. It was

Sunrise on Africa's Peaks - Mali

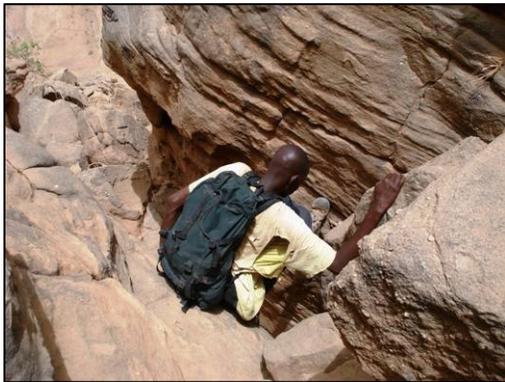
perfect, I didn't feel too intimidated but it was everything except boring. The 90 m climb took longer than what I expected and the clouds were a blessing. After the climb, we had to hike up to the top. Once on top, 5 drops of rain fell before the sun was out in full force.

Amadou warned me about the heat and I took 6 liters with me. I had two sachets of water left and was seriously thinking if I should share it with him since he ran out of water. I stopped to give him one; mentioning that it's our last water and in the process dropped the precious sachet and we shared the last 500 ml of water.

I also realized that all the locals and tourists have left for a cooler place and that we were the only crazy tourists trying to climb and hike. There was no one to have our pictures taken with or to give the kola nuts, and the water we brought



On my way to the top



Amadou on his way down

with us got so hot, we actually got a cleansing treatment in the process.

I smelled the carcass before I stumbled upon it, and was then told that even the lizards die of the heat. Years ago I saw a movie called *Dirkie* and I could just imagine what the little boy that got lost in a desert must have felt like. I tried picturing a cool breeze but started imagining diving into a blue ice cold pool, and then I thought diving into a muddy bilharzia infested dam would be great as well.

We finally made it back to the Auberge, I shouted at Al, grabbed some money before running to the garage and opened and downed half a liter of water before going back to give Amadou some as well. We were both dehydrated and even the hot shower I took was perfect. The owner then called me saying he has ordered colder water and that I should have another shower, which I off course didn't decline. I couldn't bear the thought of sweating under the mosquito net and was convinced that the mosquitoes have fled as well.



The view going down

I took my mattress and erected a semi mosquito net, soaked my Mali cloth and wrapped it wet around me and surprisingly, I did get some sleep.

3 May: 04h00 and we were waiting next to the road for the bus. The Binki bus arrived at 6h30. The bus stopped again after two hours and disappeared for three hours. Apparently they had engine problems. Alan surprised me with a frozen water sachet and I have never had something as delicious. Unfortunately, he left his on the bus and three hours later, it was boiling. Once again, we had the little girls selling their food. I bought peanuts to keep me busy and I shared it with the boys

begging for food. The one girl took it upon herself to be my guardian angel and when I offered her some, she declined, but offered us food instead.

The locals seem to suffer just as much from the heat and we finally arrived in Sevare at 17h00, after having several more stops. We bumped into Abraham, who seemed ecstatic to see us and walked with us to the bank, telling us all about his Rasta festival. Once back, we were told that our bus is leaving. I rushed to the shower, getting in with clothes and all, rushed back just in time since the passengers were all shouting at Alan and Abraham. Luckily, Abraham managed to get me some bread and mangoes plus some cool water, I had a shower and could face another 12 hours traveling. Everywhere we go we get a guardian angel looking after us, helping us with the transport and accommodation. Abraham was just glad to have met us.



The ice lady saved my life

On the bus, I grabbed a double seat, knowing the possibility of having a double seat the whole way was slim. I was also getting stiff from the climb the previous day and tried to sleep as much as possible, knowing my sense of humour might desert me any time. I always had a vision of traveling in Africa with chickens on the roof.

Two farms worth of chickens were hauled on the roof, goats were put in compartment in the left, and fish in the compartment in the right. Alan informed me that our bags were thrown in with the fish, but since I survived the guy getting car sick, the guys chewing bubblegum non stop, the guy coughing all over me and the heat, I reckoned I could

deal with the fish smelling backpack when the time comes. The fascinating bit was the fancy bus with the TV carrying all the animals.

30 km further we had a flat, but I was determined to stick to my two seats and stayed on the bus. We were seriously dehydrated and tried to drink lots of water. I have managed the perfect position to sleep in, moving my bum close to the window; I had two full seats for my body.

4 May: We arrived in Bamako, 1000 km further, by 05h00. My body was full of blue marks, but I was unsure if it was bruises from the bus or the dye coming out of my Mali cloth. We thought we would be better off waiting a while before getting a taxi to the hotel. Bad mistake. By 7h00, we were stuck in peak traffic and add to that the detours because of road works and the 97 times the taxi driver stopped to ask for directions, we finally arrived at the hotel by 9h00.

After a quick shower, we were off to the Mauritanian embassy where we waited around till 14h00 before picking up our visas. Alan had lost his sense of humour back at the hotel and had fallen asleep once back there while I amused myself by watching the battery charger. Finally it was time for a walk and we got around to an internet cafe, and I got a bit lost walking back but luckily I had the GPS so I did end up in the hotel after a while. It turned out that the hotel can be rented by the hour.

15 May: We first got a taxi and then a bus to Nouckchott, the Capital of Mauritania. I could not believe my luck. It was boiling hot but I got a frozen ice bag which saved my life for two hours. We were then passed on to another taxi, still thinking we were well on our way to Mauritania. At one stage, the taxi driver was falling asleep but luckily the exhaust pipe fell off and he woke up. At the

next town, we were passed onto a bus company and a fight broke out. Apparently the bus company in Bamako made us pay too much and the bus had already left.

After exploding, we paid the additional fee and booked into a hotel. Then it was time to explore the little border village of Nioro du Sahel, hoping to find an ice cold beer. We settled for bread, laughing cow, tomatoes and no running water. I got into washing everything except my big backpack, trying to get the long road and dust off me.

16 May: I was able to get a sugar free coffee and an onion free omelet using sign language. The bus was only leaving at 14h00, so we bought a cooler box and 5 kg of peanuts. If I had a tweezers with me, I could have passed the time by plucking my leg hairs out one by one. At 13h30, I bought 3 bags of ice, put 2 in the cooler box and spoiled myself for an hour with the third one. The bus finally arrived by 16h00 and took us to the border where few people could speak English.

Following the rest of the passengers we walked the 1.5 km to the Mauritanian border, where we discovered we should have arranged transport for our luggage. I took a motorcycle taxi back to the Mali border, hoping the guy would put one bag in front and I could hold one. The most awkward ride on a motorcycle followed. The guy put Al's backpack in the back and I had to sit on top of it, very unbalanced holding on to the petrol tank, unable to move anywhere without falling. The 1.5 km felt like 1005 km. The sun was shining directly into my face and I could see some dead animals on the desert stretch. I did not want to die in no mans land. Everyone just about cheered when I arrived, and the Mauritanian patrol waved us through, where Al was then given some tea and then we waited.



Ice bucket in hand, I made friends with the goat



Patience, patience, patience.