

FOR MOST people, says Monsieur Jaro, when you say Toumbouctou, it is like the end of the world, for others it is a place that is not there, but that is not true. I am from Toumbouctou, and I can tell you that we are right at the heart of the world.

I sit on the first of the two steps at the entrance of the hotel, the steps are sandy, the sand from the desert street, I lean against the white brown walls that stretch two stories high; the stairs are at the front doorway, a wooden door with silver coloured inlay is open, sound of a voice within.

Voices, words spoken breaking the waves BBC News, November 2011: An armed gang of kidnappers has abducted three tourists and killed a fourth in the city of Timbuktu in northern Mali. They were abducted from a restaurant in an up-market boutique hotel.

I raise my head; in front of me is a motorbike, the initials KTM are painted on its side, an Austrian motorbike whose name is a brand, a Chinese knock-off, a small affordable gift, a gift in exchange for a gift, gifts are never free. A man who wears a white turban wrapped around his face and neck stands next to the motorbike, he is ageless for the white turban covers his face fully, except for the eyes. The motorbike is red and green and white, the man stands behind it, next to the silver exhaust pipe.

There is a shop across from where I sit, it has bottles lined up outside it, the bottles are filled with yellow viscous liquid, petrol for there are no petrol stations in Toumbouctou. I imagine that the man who adjusts the rivet of the motorbike has a hawk-like nose, it will curve, long, Semitic, it will cast a shadow over his full red lips.

To the right of the bottles in which the yellow liquid flows is a telephone pole, or an electrical pole. The poles are tall, they hold a cable which is stretched across the road, on the cable, is a cat, two cats, dead cats, their fur is black and dry.

Cats are witches, says Monsieur Baba, they come in the night and search for souls, the souls of women, the souls of the old, the souls of children; not the souls of men for men are strong and so the cat witches are afraid. Because of this young boys, boys who will soon become men and who do not want to stop growing before they are men, decide that there should be no cats in Toumbouctou, so they catch and kill the cats and then throw them upwards towards the stars so they land across the cables. Cats are not for eating, but the young boys eat them, only the young boys eat these cats for they taste good and you never know, maybe by eating the flesh of a witch you can absorb witch power; adults do not eat these cats for although they may want witch power; cats are not Halal, cats are inedible, dirty.

It is dry in this desert town so the cats that hang from the cables soon dry out and become skeletons, but they are not all skeletons, some have not yet dried out, they have flesh and fur. Their mouths open, they seem to purr.

The sounds in the entrance of the hotel grow louder; Shindouk, the Tuareg, a pirate of the Sahara, as Brion Gysin called these fierce people, follows me up the staircase, his face is covered in blue, indigo blue Tuareg robes that stain the skin. Shindouk takes me by the arm, return, he says; return inside, it is not safe.

I walk into the central courtyard of the hotel, in the courtyard there



A caravan crosses the Sahara under the stars

# At the Heart of the World

*Toumbouctou is the only city in the world where magic and luminosity live together. Toumbouctou is the middle of the absolute, writes Barbara Adair*

is a pond, long rectangular shaped, in the pond is a peacock made of metal, but there is no water in the pond and the fountain does not flow. The hotel is silent, empty, a desert in a desert. I climb the staircase to the roof, a roof restaurant, and look out at the mud walled buildings; no children walk the streets, silence. I have travelled the desert with the salt caravans, Shindouk says, many days of

travel, I walked beside the camel who carried the salt, the Europeans when they reached Toumbouctou, knew the wealth of the salt, as he speaks he hands me a tablet of salt, it is heavy, white splashed with black, they said the inhabitants were very rich, salt is in very short supply, it is carried here from Tegaza, 500 miles from Toumbouctou.

National Geographic, March 2008. In 1824 the Paris-based Societe de Geographie offered a 10 000 franc prize to the first European to reach Toumbouctou. The Scotsman Gordon Laing arrived in Toumbouctou in August 1826 but he was killed a month after he got there by local inhabitants who feared European invasion, appropriation and destruction. The Frenchman Rene Caillie

arrived there in 1828, he travelled alone, in disguise, he spoke Arabic, he was a disguised Muslim. He stayed in Toumbouctou for six months, he then returned safely to Paris and claimed the 10 000 francs.

1723 Leo Africanus: the rich king of Toumbouctou hath many plates and sceptres of gold, some weighing more than 1300 pounds (almost 600kg); he hath always 3 000 horsemen and a great store of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges

I walk over to the west, this is where the sun will descend, a monument to the 1996 Tuareg uprising reaches over the street, shadows descend, rebellion.

That, Shindouk says, is my memorial, in 1996, under the Konaré government 3 000 guns were burned in a ceremony called the flame of peace, to commemorate this ceremony a monument was built.

And the guns, the 3 000 guns, they burn again.

I look out, the city is empty, there are no people on the streets that are made of sand, except an old man who crouches in the shade of a doorway, he blows the amber coals in a brazier, he makes tea, the mint tea that everyone in the city drinks, the mint tea that is made in China for the Chinese bear gifts and bring tea to this far-off desert city. And there are no visitors, no people who wear hats and sunglasses to shade them from the sun, there are no tourists.

Foreign Office warning: If you are travelling to Mali as part of an organised tour you should confirm with the organisers that they are aware of our travel advice and that they can confirm in writing that their travel insurance still applies.

You should also be aware that the local governments in the region are also attacked by AQ-M. The security forces in Mali, Niger and Mauritania have all suffered fatalities.

I accompany Shindouk to the Sankore Mosque; I hide in his indigo robes.

There is a plaque at the entrance of the mosque. It says that the Sankore Mosque is built of a clay like mud called banco, is made up of clay soil, sand and various straw substances. Once a year, after the rains have fallen, the mud starts to lose its grasp on the wooden poles.

The mud is mixed with Karite, this is a gum-like substance that comes from the Karite tree, this is used like butter to bind the mud, in this way the mud does not dissolve as quickly.

The butter of the Karite tree is called shea butter and comes from the nuts of the tree. It is a solid white fat that, when heated, becomes an emulsion that can be dissolved in water. It is then mixed in with the mixture of sand and clay.

The Sankore Mosque is a world heritage site. I walk to the walls of the mosque; I cannot go inside for non-Muslims are prohibited from entering. Tell me a story of this famous mosque, I ask Shindouk.

Once, long ago the Muezzin came across an old man who was praying in the doorway. The man requested permission to go inside the building as he was devout and the building offered him shade for his prayers. The Muezzin acceded to his request but soon it became clear the man was not to move. The Muezzin was unhappy and so he went to the Imam, he requested permission to remove the man, the Imam would not agree, the man was doing no one harm.

The Muezzin, being curious, asked the old man what he was doing, the man said that soon he would show the Imam the stars at midday. The Muezzin, reported this to the Imam, he said that the old man was crazy and mad and should be removed immediately, but the Imam, being a man who often spoke to the spirit of Mohammed, said that the man should stay. Time passed, who can tell how long, for long is slow and how slow is swift, and the old man called the Imam. Inside the mosque it was dark save for a small hole that had been made in the roof, the hole was there for ventilation, but it also gave the dark interior some light. It was midday; the sun was directly above the mosque. The old man held a piece of flat steel under the light that came inside the mosque from the hole in the roof, the flat steel caused the light to fragment and small holes appeared on the floor that was made of sand. The Imam looked closely, what was there in the small pin-pricks of light that shone through the holes of the steel flat plate? Stars, the old man said, this is what the sky looks like now, if we could see the stars as if it was night, this is what the sky will look like. And it was indeed so.

As I celebrate my birthday in Toumbouctou I know that I will never be quite the same again. You may ask 'why go there and why now?' My reply will be that once there was a time when I wanted to live, I wanted to know magic and now this time is here, and this city, no other, could ever provide this vast luminosity, for Toumbouctou is the middle of the absolute. And I will always return, whatever the cost in comfort and money and security, for the absolute has no price.



Shindouk, the pirate of the Sahara

PICTURE BARBARA ADAIR



A world heritage site: Sankore Mosque

PICTURE BARBARA ADAIR



A river boat sails through magic and mystery in Mali