

A nice breeze, and we figured it would be nice sleeping up there. But where would we go during the day when the sun beat down on the roof, where would we put our stuff. Then a stiff wind began, full of sand, and we had to grab like mad to keep our stuff from blowing away. By this point we'd had it, and stalked back to the office. Oh, he says, didn't you know you're to sleep in the dining room. You'd have it all to yourselves, and then when a cabin opens up... So we gave in, out of sheer tiredness of the whole blasted affair, and frustration. Could we have gotten our money back without a major hassle? And if so, it meant finding a place to stay the night and trying to find a taxi in the morning. But we of course did not have the dining room to ourselves. It was packed to the gills, and we barely had room to sleep.



## inconveniences of our boat trip

Pilot inept: run aground on shore on a wide section of river, must wait to drift free. We're told this also happened on the Barnako to Mopti run. At port last night he couldn't control the boat, and it drifted back and forth, at one point nearly shearing off the loading ramp.

~~We were~~ told as a special favor we can sleep in the dining room, as we seem to be the only cabinless passengers.

But by night the room was packed wall to wall with people, and we could barely sleep it was so crowded. One woman layed her mat in front of the door, so to get out you had to walk over her.

The 2nd class deck, reserved for 2nd class passengers, is chock full of 3d & 4th class passengers and their incredible mounds of baggage, so those of us who've paid a fortune don't even have room to walk or sit out on deck. The shower is broken, the WC stinks to high heaven and 3rd & 4th class folks use it.



There are very inadequate facilities for the number of people on this boat. People wash up on the deck, splashing water all over, and onto the 4th class passengers crammed into the "hold" below.

People throw everything into the river: spit, chamber pots, leftover food (no famine here - saw half a pot of macaroni get tossed). People are really pretty gross. A man grabbed a curtain to wipe his face on as he left the dining room. The decks are wet & slimy with all sorts of lovely things. People are packed everywhere.

Breakfast: hot sweet milk & a small piece of bread. This trip ought to be good for my figure!

Sat. Oct. 4

I've let myself fall into quite a funk on this boat trip, which is of course a mistake. I've ruffled quite a few feathers, forgetting I'd have to spend 3-4 days with these people. So now I'm trying my best to smooth these feathers. As I so often do,



I jumped to quite a few erroneous conclusions, making a fool of myself in the process. I mistakenly

assumed we were the only suckers who had paid full price, ~~know~~ not realizing we were getting ripped off. I also thought we were first on the waiting list for a 2nd class cabin. Wrong on both counts. Turns out there are many people who've paid 1st + 2nd class tickets - full price - knowing they would not get a cabin and would fight for a place on the crowded decks (until we demanding white folk came along, no one was allowed to sleep in the dining room). Therefore there are many people waiting for 2nd class cabins, and we may well not get one. Thus we haul our baggage around into the dining room at night, and out onto the deck during the day. The thing that blows me away is that these people knew when they bought their tickets that they would have no cabin, whereas we didn't realize that, nor were we aware of the disgusting conditions on the boat. They must



be rich to throw away money like that, or very foolish.

Last night we slept on the roof, which was delightful. A lovely, cool breeze, stars, and no mosquitoes! The view from up there is wonderful, especially when we stop to load or unload. Happily, not too many people hang out up there, and there's plenty of space. Mali is heavily muslim, and 5x a day the male contingent on the boat face toward Mecca to pray.

Since Mopti we've stopped 34 times, at Aka, Niafunké, & Jonka, & Diré. Next stop, Timbuktu. At each stop, crowds pour down from the town to the river's edge, a sea of color & faces. Some wade up to the boat, often chest high, to sell fish & meat, beignes, breads, cigarettes. Canoes ply back & forth to shore, loading & unloading people & goods.

6 Mali PCV's disembarked at Diré, most to spend a 3rd year. Saw it only at half-light.

Although there are a surprising number of trees still (at least near the river), the settlements are sparse, and all but the



trip is desolate, sun-baked sand. Yesterday we saw termite mounds by the hundreds, some as big as the banco houses, rising from the sand, as smooth & hard as boulders. Houses here are either square, grey banco, with flat, earthen roofs, or grass huts made by bending branches into a dome and covering with grass mats. These may be for nomads, as the branches could be transported & reused. Grass does not appear abundant however, and may explain the absence of sun shelters in the settlements.

~~At~~ We passed a settlement called Youwarou, across from Aka, where a World Wildlife team is studying birds in the marshlands. Have seen many birds, especially herons & egrets, but have no binoculars to see more. Today we passed some hippos, supposedly common along certain sections of river, but I didn't see them.

The boat seems much less crowded today - perhaps many people got off at Diré. It's a big improvement over yesterday! The decks were also cleaned this



morning, and although the we's are still horrific, the place is fairly livable.

Not all of the army folk are going all the way to gas <sup>often</sup> ~~all~~. Most are northern Malians, with distinctive north african features: lighter skin, aquiline, hawkish nose. Many wear turbans (army green), and the result is eerily reminiscent of the "evil" troops of Khadafi or the middle east.

Statistics show that each year the maximum height of the Niger river (flood stage) is decreasing. Thus the water table is also decreasing. It appears this is ~~also~~ a climatic change, mostly independent of man's activities. Yet man's activities must aggravate it - no one knows for sure. This year has been a bad one, due to locust damage and capricious rains. June rains were good, but they also allowed the hatching of locust eggs which ~~are~~ lay deep in the soil & dormant for several years during the drought. They & a bumper crop of rodents ate the young shoots - 3 plantings



in a row. By the time the locusts moved on, and a 4<sup>th</sup> planting was made, the rains had slacked off - only 4 good rains in Aug., usually a month of almost daily rains. Many fear the harvests may be total failures.

Sun. Oct. 5

Hooray! As of yesterday noon we have our own cabin! We don't even have to share with a 4<sup>th</sup> person. And the boat contains - literally - half as many people now. Many got off at Dine, and more at Limbucton, incl. the majority of the army. We'll never know which is the "normal" situation (normal is an even more meaningless term in Africa): the overcrowded chaos of people + baggage + stench; or this peaceful calmness of empty aisles, lots of space, no lines for the WC + shower. It's wonderful! Even the food has improved! We've fallen into a pleasant shipboard routine. The boat is very steady - no motion, no seasickness, and no smell of diesel, thank god. There are 3 boats that



ply the river, all built by the Germans. We're on the Tombouctou, made to hold 288, but usually

holding 4-500. We hear the boats lose money and must be subsidized. One suspects bad management and skimming - the usual sad story.

So yesterday we hit Tombouctou.

A ~~canal~~ canal runs up to Kabara, 9 k's from T., but it was too shallow yet, so we stopped at Oye, another 3 k's farther. Moore knew how long we'd stay, so we were afraid to try to go to Tombouctou and maybe miss the boat. Also it was high noon, hot as hades, and a sandstorm had kicked up a pall of harsh, hot, gritty wind.

I elected to stay on board, but Mike & Dave decided to give it a try. They walked in that heat about 1 k. toward Kabara, then got a lift.

A big truck took them from Kabara to Tombouctou. They arrived, had a brief look around, got nervous about missing the boat, and hopped on the next available truck. Their brief impressions: buildings made of reddish clay brick, their bases buried in sand. Dry, hot, sandy, desolate. They snapped a photo



or two, and made it back to the boat with barely an hour to spare. As it turned out we only spent 3 hrs.,

whereas the boat occasionally spends 6 or 7. Oye, where we docked, is a desolate spit of sand and a few ephemeral grass huts, where Tuaregs await the boat for trading. We were invited into a hut for tea by a young Tuareg trader with an eye for a sale. The hut was low - not quite high enough to stand up in - and quonset shaped. Made of bent branches and covered with grass mats, you bend over to crawl in through the opening. Inside, it was cool & dark, and protected from the hot sandy wind. A young woman draped in black sat in one corner, nursing a tiny, light-skinned newborn. An older man, a blacksmith, sat with his anvil & tools, and behind him a young girl & boy with broad smiles. We sat on a grass mat & drank the traditional black tea with lots of sugar, while our host tried to sell us all manner of knives & leather pouches. We finally bought a Tuareg pipe in a leather pouch, which Steve had requested - but for an exorbitant price.