

A lot of rice is grown along the river, by irrigation. Diesel pumps sit at the river's edge

drawing water up into the fields.

Still quite a few trees & scrub, but lots of sand dunes too.

Bamboo houses & grass huts are strewn at intervals along both banks. The dunes are impressive - huge mountains of crystalline sand, marching relentlessly into the river.

Now I understand why desert dwellers wear tent-like robes, & thick coiled turbans.

The turbans can be moistened to help cool the body, and the robes provide essential shelter against the sun, and sand-laden wind.

They also serve as a kind of portable tent or protective shelter.

We saw many Tuaregs in Mopti, especially women & children. It seems many of these nomadic people can no longer eke out a living in the desert, so have moved into the cities or the desert fringe.

The ones we saw wore tattered indigo wraps, and the women's faces were haggard & baggy, though full of smiles. The indigo

cloth turns their skin blue and against their naturally light skin gives them a sickly pallor - the

bluish cast of death. It's eerie and unhealthy-looking. They appeared to have lived very hard lives.

I got the impression the Tuareg refugees here are looked down upon as street people - beggars & petty thieves who live & sleep on the streets.

It's ironic because supposedly the Tuareg think of themselves as "white", and superior to the true blacks, and took blacks as slaves at one time. Now the blacks dislike them, in theory because of this.

(Note on indigo cloth: The term "Blue Men of the Desert" comes from the bluish skin color caused by the bleeding of the homemade indigo dyes).

The Tuareg women smoke traditional ebony & silver pipes. These are fluted tubes stuffed with tobacco & puffed like a cigarette.

Next to the smooth-skinned, coffee & chocolate faces of the "black" women, the Tuareg women are pretty homely, though we have

seen some pretty ones.

Some of the black women on this boat are positively glamorous, with piles of cascading tresses, lots of jewelry, and seductive costumes. We see very little "Western-style" clothes here, and none of the huge "dead yavo" markets so common in Togo. The Africans generally dress like Africans. Gorgeous cloth & tailors compose huge sections of the markets.

One of the nicest things about Mali is the rich mix of ethnic groups, faces, costumes.

A rich, colorful display of the exotic.

In Bambara, the main language in Mali, us white folk are called "Toubab".

Stopped this morning in Bamba, a village of straw weavers. They make beautiful hats, baskets, and mats in vibrant colors, and the water next to the boat was a sea of people holding out armfuls of these for sale. Prices were surprisingly high, however. The village spills down a steep dune to the edge

of the river, its buildings half buried in the shifting sands.

A crowd of people came to the water's edge, nearly faceless in voluminous ^{mono-}colored robes and wound turbans. Saw our first Sahara camels!

Just at sunset we pulled over to Bourem, where a good-sized town nestles beside a phosphate factory. The phosphate lies open to the sky in the desert beyond, and trucks simply scoop it up and haul it down to the factory.

There it seems it's turned into fertilizer, and distributed throughout the country. Besides the factory, people here make their living from herding and some small farming. But during the past few very dry years, most of the pasturage has died off, and the herds with it. Now most young people go to the cities to look for work, then send money back home. They rarely ever return home, though, except to visit. The rural exodus.

Fascinating to watch Bourem come alive with the boat's arrival. Onshore vendors sell cigarettes, breads, canned goods, food aid commodities.

From off the boat pour women bearing
tubs of citrus fruit, eggs, kola nuts,
all the luxuries from the south.
For perhaps an hour, the dock
becomes an animated market, a
sea of people buying, selling, haggling,
taking advantage of this weekly
visit to make a little money, buy
a few things. We watch for a while
from the roof, wondering what the
view is like from the ~~dune~~ ^{dune} top
on which the sloping village is
built. Then as night falls and
a tiny crescent of moon appears,
we go down and out into the sea
of people to the coffee vendor,
for a delicious "coffee", really just
hot, sweet milk with a dollop of
Nescafé. A tiny old ~~Suareg~~ ^{Suareg} man
with a toothless ~~gun~~ ^{gun} ~~gun~~, points
to his grey stubbled chin and I
give him 10 francs. He begins to
chant & dance happily, like a mischievous
elf, thanking us, and people gather
around us, clapping & laughing.
Then the boat horn blows and
everyone scurries. From above it
looks like a disrupted ant's
nest, or mice in a maze.
Goodbyes are shouted, last-minute
purchases are hastily made, and
off we go into the night.

Mon. ~~Sept~~ Oct. 6

The boat pulled in to Gao early this morning - and they let us sleep till daylight. About 6am, the town was very quiet, almost deserted. A few young kids gathered round us and trailed along like the pied piper. We found coffee in the market, the table swarming with flies, then walked across town to look for the house of a Canadian whose name we'd been given. Gao feels as if most of it just recently sprung up from the desert. The buildings look very new & neat & arranged. Between suburb-like clusters of block buildings are wide open spaces of empty brown sand, and beyond is a sea of grass tent domes. Huge food distribution tents & beautiful new clinic facilities testify to the famine years. But we're told that the famine didn't really hit here - there were hardships, but people got by OK. There was always water, and refugees didn't pour in here. But the food aid came, and supposedly many people "played poor" to get handouts. Thus the tent cities. The Canadian was out of town, so we headed for the bus station to

arrange our trip to Niamey. Today's bus is full, and means a 2-day wait until Wednesday's ~~bus~~ bus.

Oh well. Then the bus folk began to hassle us about our Niger visa, saying it wasn't valid because it was issued in Cotonou! They said we must go the Police to have our visas arranged. As it turns out, everyone must go to the Police to have their passport examined and stamped. All of us had to renew our Mali visas, and the ~~tot~~ Police first gave us a scare by bawling us out about our expired visas. But for 28,000 francs of course, they could arrange everything! What can one say? If you want your exit ~~visa~~ stamp, you pay. We were ripped off by them for something like 16,000, but there's nothing we can do.

This overcharging is notoriously bad here. But in the midst of all this insanity we met a few nice people, like the fellow who helped Dave buy an illegal WHO card, or Louis, who is rich and owns a restaurant with ice-cold beer & cheap food. He gave us a note for his friend the asst. director at the bus station, which should help us perhaps.

Staying after all at the Atlante Hotel. Food & drink are sky high, but the rooms are reasonable & comfortable.

Not much other choice. Had an entourage of would-be little boy guides drive us nuts most of the day, though they did help us find our way around town. It was very, very hot, and last night as the heat finally began to subside, the ill-lit streets showed hazy with all the sand in the air. How do you create solid foundations for bldg. in a city built on sand?

Oct.
Thurs. ~~Sept.~~ 9

I am at a very low end of my emotional tether. A bad case of the tourist blues, ~~or~~ exacerbated by the corruption here and the unpleasantness of being white in a black land.

Rarely have I felt so smudged. For 2 days in Gao, whenever we left the confines of the hotel a band of children would surround us and follow us everywhere, chattering, whining, asking for money & gifts. They got very obnoxious the second day, to the point of throwing pebbles at us and pushing us

when we weren't looking. We're afraid to even look or smile at people, for fear they'll want to sell us something, or demand a cadeau. It's not a pleasant feeling, to feel no one likes you except for your money. People tease us, make fun of us, stare at us. No one has offered to help us on this crazy bus trip, where we stop & go with no explanations. My opinion of Africans has dropped considerably on this trip, and the list of adjectives running through my head is not flattering. Being a tourist is often a drag, but here I think it's worse. And the corruption! Officials demand bribes so openly that they seem to truly think it's their due, and not corruption at all. Mali so far has been the worst. At the exit last night the ~~ga~~ police called me in twice to harass me for a "voluntary cadeau" which of course is not voluntary.

The bus ride itself isn't bad. It's 450 kms to Niamey, but takes 30 hours, most of it border stops. We're on a huge bus equipped for desert travel: high clearance and huge tires and low gears.

It's surprisingly undercrowded, with only 1 person to a seat! The road is mainly a pair of ruts through the sand &

cobbles & streambeds, and very bumpy. A kidney belt may have been wise. It's hot, hot, hot, and so dry my nose is raw & scabbed inside. Dust filters in through the doors & windows, and a bandana is nice for breathing through.

The irony is that the river is often a stone's throw away, and the sight of that wet, sparkling, cool water only increases the heat & dust & discomfort. It's ironic that one of Africa's ~~the~~ greatest rivers forms the southern border of the world's greatest desert. Such a big river has surprisingly little impact on its surroundings. Although the river is right now at its highest there is but a narrow ribbon of green along the river's banks.

The landscape is desolate brown sand & scrub & gravel, broken here & there by a grove of shaggy palms, a scattering of thorn acacia, or an outcropping of black basalt cobbles.

Slept at the Niger border, a town called Yaso. Slept well

despite rumours of bad mosquitoes there.
No breakfast or dinner yesterday,
just snacks & a bit of rice &
sauce for lunch.

~~Thurs.~~ Oct.

Sun. Oct. 12 Miami.

Arrived here Thurs. eve after a long hot day of many stops and five thorough searches. The Police met us at the Miami Station to search us and ~~take~~^{check} our passports. There were 4 of us white folk on the bus, and after an hour of waiting for our passports we were told to get in a van, no questions, no explanations. They drove us downtown (a free ride nevertheless), and deposited us at police hqtrs. No one knew why we were there or what to do with us, so first they informed us we'd spend the night there, but then said we could just come back in the morning. Then in the morning we went through a half hour of run-around until someone could dream up an excuse for taking our passports (you didn't have a police stamp for Miami), and then we were free. Whew.

We filled out 6 or 7 police forms in the 200 kms. between the Niger border & Niamey. We're staying at the Peace Corps house here, which is very pleasant (and free). Mike is pretty sick, with diarrhea & a bad cold, so we'll stay at least until tomorrow, and ~~get~~ see the P.C. doctor.

Niamey is much smaller & less developed than I expected. A few large, modern buildings, and even a zoo & museum, but mostly it's a sprawling, dusty series of neighborhoods & markets linked by large avenues & wide sandy streets. There are few restaurants or shops, but still lots of goods are available. The Tilyans built an enormous green & cream-colored mosque on the edge of town, and the Chinese are building a big outdoor stadium. The Chinese approach to development: send Chinese workers to build something as a gift that will then generate a lot of income for the govt. like a stadium or factory. Saw the Niger president fly by in his shiny black flag

flopper the other day. Dave has gone back to Togo - left yesterday.

This weekend is a big softball tourney here in Niamey, and the whole American community has turned out for 2 days of fun & games. Went to a spaghetti dinner at the Marine house Fri. night. Dozens of kids and all-American families.

Sat. & Sun. all-day softball games at the American school field. Pool included. Saw George, Adia's brother, for a few hours Saturday morning. He's living in Niamey, working as a metal work apprentice.

Niamey has an interesting museum: a series of small display pavilions surrounded by landscaped grounds and a "zoo" - a series of small cages housing a sampling of native fauna.

Got lucky and caught a ride Monday all the way to Koupele, in Bourkina. This was

after get another "playoff" softball game, and a potluck feast

and awards ceremony poolside at the Ambassador's riverfront estate. Gorgeous place. From Korpela we made it to Bitou, the border station, ^{by} ~~by~~ that night. Were back in Tapaong by 10:30 the next day!

Sat. Oct. 18

Our 5 year "meeting each other" anniversary. Wow, hard to believe 5 years already!

Back in Bogor, got BBC's jolly good show tuned in for the first time in 2 months! Spent 2 days getting the house & yard cleaned up. The rains are over, and a hazy Harmattan dust has moved in. Hot but also a bit humid. I'll miss the rain, but it's nice not to have to worry about leaks, walls falling down, etc.

Total lunar eclipse last night, lasted several hours.