

namaste

October 2005

Vol 2, Issue 7



Africa...
Heidi does Desert...
The Tuareg People of the Sahara
The Air Mountains of the Tenere, Niger
Trekking in the Dogon Region of Mali
Plus...
Timbuktu & Mopti
Namaste Global Expedition
...and more

Namaste!

Welcome to the October 2005 edition of Namaste News...

After an epic day (634 miles) from Bangui in Central Africa to N'Djamena in Chad, October has been a month of fantastic desert exploration. From a remote tour around Lake Chad to the beautiful Air Mountains and Tenere Desert of Niger; and along the banks of the Niger River to the ancient desert towns of Timbuktu and Mopti in Mali.

Taking in a fascinating array of ancient cultures, from the Saharan Tuareg nomads to the unique Dogon people of Mali, the month ended in the funky town of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.

Packed full of features as well as the regular updates, feel free to send me an email with your suggestions and ideas for future issues (chris.charlton@namaste.co.uk)

Cheers, Chris

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Global Expedition Highlights

1/10/05 Day 545
Bossebele Mile 56947



4/10/05 Day 548
N'Djamena Mile 57354



6/10/05 Day 550
Bol Mile 57539



8/10/05 Day 552
Rig-Rig Mile 57629



11/10/05 Day 555
Zinder Mile 58140



30/10/05 Day 574
Ouagadougou Mile 60630



13/10/05 Day 557
Agadez Mile 58330



28/10/05 Day 572
Teli Mile 60395



16/10/05 Day 560
Tenere Desert Mile 58671



27/10/05 Day 571
Dountza Mile 60212



26/10/05 Day 570
Timbuktu Mile 60073



24/10/05 Day 568
Amakouladji Mile 59821



20/10/05 Day 564
Niamey Mile 59520



17/10/05 Day 561
Timia Mile 58788



Photos in this issue
by Chris Charlton & Heidi Bliedung

Expedition Trivia...

# of Days (overall):	31 (575)
Miles in month (overall):	4014 (60630)
Avg miles/day (overall):	129 (105)
Longest day miles (overall):	634 (634)
# countries (overall):	5 (36)
# of police stops (overall):	34 (296)

Top Tips this month...

Top Tip:	Air Mountains, Niger
Favourite City:	Ouagadougou, Burkina
Adventure Spot:	Dogon Region, Mali
Place to Stay:	Auberge D'Azel, Agadez
Night Spot:	Anamar, Timbuktu
Wilderness:	Tenere Desert, Niger

Features...

Discover the beautiful Air Mountains of Niger on page 2; find out more about the Tuareg Peoples of the Sahara on page 6 and the Dogon People of Mali on page 7. Explore Timbuktu and Mopti on page 8 and read the Expedition Europe Plan on page 9 & the Africa Plan on page 10. And find out what is coming next in future issues of Namaste News on page 11...

The Air Mountains of the Tenéré, Niger...

Niger, a landlocked country in western Africa, can be divided into three zones: the northern, central, and southern. The northern zone, covering more than half of the total area of the republic, lies within the Sahara. It is a highland region of plateaux and mountains and, except in scattered oases, has little vegetation. In this zone is Mount Bagzane, the highest elevation



Camels passing between the myriad rock formations amidst the sand and mountains...

in the country.

The central zone, known as the Sahel, is semi-arid and lightly wooded. The southern zone is a fertile, forested area that benefits from adequate rainfall and, in the southwest, from the periodic overflow of the Niger River, virtually the only river in the country. On the southeast, Niger borders one of the largest lakes of the continent, the shallow Lake Chad.

Rising as high as 1,944 metres (6,378 feet) above the Sahara, the Air Mountains, including Mount Bagzane, extend north to south in northern Niger, covering an area the size of Switzerland. East of the mountains is the vast Tenéré Desert, a bleak expanse of sand and gravel plains, that also contains some of the Sahara's most beautiful sand dune areas. Within this region lie the Air and Tenéré reserves which



The hospitable Tuareg people that inhabit this land have a fascinating history...

were made a World Heritage Site in 1991.

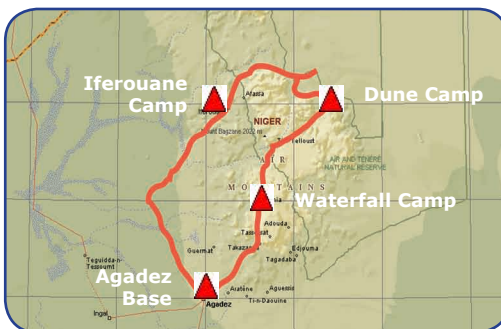
Agadez, like Timbuktu, is one of the great, ancient trading towns of the Sahara, and the gateway for expeditions into the Air Mountains and some of the most spectacular desert and mountain scenery in Africa.

At 520 m (1,700 ft) above sea level, Agadez itself lies in an arid region of sandy basins and sandstone cliffs ranging from 300 to 1,000 m (980 to 3,280 ft) and receives about 300 mm (12 in) of rainfall each year.

As the former capital of a Tuareg kingdom, Agadez has some splendid examples of Sudanese mud-brick architecture, including a 16th-century mosque (about 90 per cent of the Niger's population is Muslim). In later centuries the town faced decline, but survived as a camel market. Traditionally renowned for its silversmiths and leather-workers, the economy of modern Agadez is based on such industries as the mining of salt and uranium, and tourism.

In ancient times, it served as a trading city on the caravan route to the Sahara, thriving off the principal route from Gao (in Mali) to Tripoli (in Libya). Some were as large as 20,000 camels laden with gold, salt and slaves. Today, salt caravans still ply these ancient desert routes, though trucks are used as well as camels.

Ancient river valleys, called kori, once cut through this mountainous region, leaving traces of water beneath the sand. This valuable



Our 4-day, 580-mile 4*4 route through the Air Mountains (GPS co-ordinates available)...

resource, tapped through bore holes, makes it possible for the area's nomadic Tuareg people to raise livestock and inhabit this dry land.

The region's deeply dissected valleys also contain some vegetation on which the livestock can graze. This also provides food for the few wild animals that continue to live in the Sahara, including the rare addax, an antelope that can survive without water by eating succulent leaves, and graceful gazelles, remarkable to watch as they sprint across the sand.

The Air Mountains also contain a treasure trove of Neolithic art, including rock engravings (petroglyphs) and paintings dating back 7,000 to 10,000 years, when the Sahara received far more rain than it does today. The carvings were rendered through a process known as 'pecking', the use of a heavy, sharp stone; and the most common subjects depicted are people, horses, cows, giraffes, gazelles and elephants.

Our 4-day, 580-mile roundtrip 4*4 tour of Niger's mountain oasis from Agadez was an exhilarating ride through desert and mountain terrain, interspersed by fascinating cultural

interaction with the local Tuareg. We hired a Tuareg guide (compulsory to visit the region), complete with assistant and their own 4*4, through Agadez Expeditions, run by the extremely hospitable Akly & Celine, who also run the best place to stay in town, Auberge d'Azal.

Our guides, Agak and Dami, were first class,



Camping in the dunes with nothing but an ocean of sand in all directions...

and we particularly enjoyed sharing stories around the campfire, while deepening our mutual, cultural understanding [for more on the Tuareg people, see the article on page 7.] Aside from route-finding and spotting rock art sites, our guides were an invaluable source of information and introduction to the local Tuareg community.

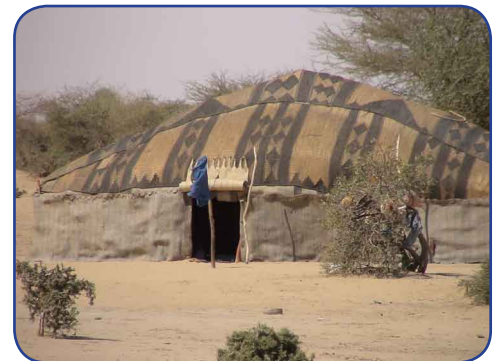
With regular stops for tea, the most important Tuareg drink, our days consisted of around 5-6 hours of challenging driving (5 days would have been better), across all types of desert terrain, from rocky mountain paths to pristine dunes, a great place to test the desert capabilities of the Landie. Each day, we also visited local sites, from rock art to desert oases and waterfalls; from historic, abandoned towns to modern village life, including one display of public theatre in Iferouane.



The quintessential desert camel caravan, often travelling for 30 days at a time ...

A lasting memory will definitely be our dune camp, overlooking the vast Tenéré Desert. Watching the sun set atop a giant, untouched sand dune, in the knowledge that there was nothing between us and the next piece of civilisation except a 1,000km-wide ocean of sand was truly awesome...

Desert photo-collage...



Global Expedition Update

After a day of relaxation in Bangui in the Central African Republic (CAR), Patrick and I also managed to obtain our Chad visas. This was partly forward-planning as we intended to cross the CAR/Chad border through remote and infrequently travelled terrain. Two thirds of the epic Central Africa crossing had been completed, one third to go and we had 3 days...

Before setting out, we had some time to reflect on a country that receives little to no media attention and few travellers have been. People have lived in Central Africa for hundreds of thousands of years; they were amongst the earliest modern humans to develop stone tools, use fire to cook vegetables and meat, and communicate using speech. Around 10,000 years ago, hunting peoples began to settle along the rivers and to fish for food. Food-gathering peoples settled by lakes and began to cultivate wild grains, tubers, oil palms, and bananas. These important additions to their diet enabled the population to expand and develop in more settled patterns.

CAR is situated on the northern edge of the River Congo basin. Most of the land is a plateau that ranges in elevation from about 610 to 790m (2,000 to 2,600 ft), and which forms the watershed between drainage northward to Lake Chad and southward to the Congo system. Two ranges of hills in the north and north-east rise to maximum heights of about 1,400 m (4,600 ft). Most of the country has a savannah vegetation-grassland interspersed with trees. Open grassland is found in the extreme north, and a dense rainforest covers most of the south.

The CAR's economy is one of the least developed in Africa and the country depends on aid donors and on France. Support from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank is contingent upon stabilization of government finances and stimulation of private-sector economic activity.

Exploitation of mineral and forest resources has been severely hampered by a poor internal transport network, by the CAR's landlocked position, and by the distance, and difficult transport routes, to the sea. About half of the population earns its livelihood by farming, mainly in the subsistence sector. Agricultural output is fairly evenly balanced



The jungle of southern Chad



Collecting firewood in the Tenere Desert

Did you know?

"Mali is the part-time home to large herds of migratory elephants. Mali's desert elephants have longer legs and shorter tusks than their East African cousins and inhabit the Gourma region between the Niger River and the border with Burkina Faso. Their annual 1,000km circuit is the longest elephant migration in Africa."

between subsistence and export crops. The principal sources of revenue are diamond, coffee, tobacco, cotton, and timber exports.

The CAR gained independence from France in 1960. David Dacko served as the country's first president, but was overthrown in a coup led by Colonel Jean-Bedel Bokassa in 1966. In 1977 Bokassa crowned himself Emperor Bokassa I, in ceremonies that were estimated to have cost one-quarter of the country's income. His excesses eventually prompted France to support a coup led by Dacko in 1979 while Bokassa was out of the country. The republic was restored, but coups continued, an ever-present threat even today.

Not wishing to wait around for the next coup, we set out on the road north, first to the village of Bossembele, where we spent the night. As we had become so accustomed to in our crossing of southern CAR, we encountered frequent roadblocks. Last month, I said I would talk more

about these...

In part, when you are assessing potential threats, roadblocks are a chief concern. Firstly, you have to slow down, and stop, though the barriers are rarely substantial; secondly, they are staffed by heavily armed, bored, inept or hungry soldiers and policemen, who all too frequently abuse their own people; and thirdly, they might be drunk, and consider white boys' toys too much of a temptation.

While we encountered countless such roadblocks, we rarely felt intimidated or threatened; simply frustrated at the constant interruption to our journey's progress and the persistent request for cash or any other bribe we could spare. For the most part, we got away with friendly smiles, firm and confident characters, and a reasonable handout of cigarettes.

Perhaps to put this in perspective, of all the soldiers and policemen we met in Central Africa, none were as bad as some I have encountered in England! That is not to say, however, that many have committed horrific acts of violence and abuse, but this has been directed at local communities

continued on page 3...

Coming Up...to find out how to join, click below

November 2005

Through Burkina to the National Parks of northern Ghana, before heading west through Ivory Coast to the mountains of Guinea and onwards to the Atlantic coast of the Gambia and Senegal, before turning north across the Adrar plateau of Mauritania along the western Sahara...

December 2005

Completing the crossing of the Western Sahara along the Atlantic Coast; then a tour of the length of the Atlas Mountains and ancient cities of Morocco. Finally crossing into Spain and France for Christmas and returning to Algeria and Tunisia in North Africa in the New Year...



Camp in a desert oasis

Global Expedition Update cont...

and competing tribes, not to westerners, though sometimes on rare occasions, they have been targeted as a potential source of ransom income. The risk of travel in this region is far greater for a black African than to a white African or foreigner.

However, as recent events have unfolded in northern Uganda, just a few weeks after our visit, including the killing of a British tourist, and other NGO staff, by the LRA, the planning and preparation



The Mosque in Agadez

we did for our route across this section of Central Africa was not underestimated!

From Bossembele, we had the expedition's most epic day's drive all the way to N'Djamena. Perhaps my text message to Paul in the UK (who was receiving daily sat calls and co-ordinating any required emergency response) on arrival there sums up the journey that day:

"Hi Paul, just arrived in N'Djamena after an epic drive, the expedition's longest. 23 hours non-stop, 1,015km - 650km off-road - 200km through bandit country. Knackered, but all good!"

Utterly exhausted, we bimbled about town just after sunrise looking for a hotel, of which there were about 3 that were decent. We were immediately surprised by how expensive everything was in Chad. Nothing less than US\$100 a night for a moderate, bug-infested hotel room. Nonetheless, we checked in and revelled in the fact we had just pulled off an epic and pioneering crossing of Central Africa. Time for more beers...

The ride had also taken its toll. Patrick, who had been feeling a bit off during the previous day or so, finally succumbed to the power of the mosquito, falling sick with malaria. Potentially fatal to anyone without treatment, malaria is Africa's biggest killer. Fortunately, hard-won experience and previous bouts of the disease, Patrick was well-armed with medicine.

It was a little surreal the following day, as I began the preparations for the next, desert-filled section of the expedition, while Patrick sweated out the fever in his hotel room. It was also good reason to make sure he got on the earliest flight out of the country and back home and a doctor, which he managed on 5 October. A tough finish to a tough trip and Patrick, I salute you for your resilience, compassion, wisdom and friendship for a section of the expedition that will stay with me forever.

The previous evening, Heidi had also arrived on time to begin her 10-week journey with me across the Sahara and West Africa. I can only imagine her feelings, arriving into a hot, bug-infested, dirty, light-flickering N'Djamena airport from the comforts of a Canadian home. In at the deep end for sure, but after two previous trips with me in Central America and Bolivia, I was confident she would get into her stride quickly.

With Patrick safely on his way home, Heidi and

I decided to get under way without delay, taking time to restock our provisions and collect a visa for Niger, into which we would cross at a remote desert post north of Lake Chad.

Heading out of town, I was still pumped from the Central Africa section and probably bored Heidi with stories of the crossing; and at the same time very conscious of the complete change in terrain and challenge. Out of the jungle and into the desert - no rest for the wicked on this trip! Whilst clear of any major human threat, give or take, the challenge was now the terrain. Up first, a 425-mile desert route around Lake Chad, criss-crossing between the Sahel belt and true desert in temperatures of up to 48C.

It was also a good time to practice desert vehicle driving and recovery techniques; and test long-range navigation plans. Miles of open, featureless, sandy terrain with paths and pistes creating a limitless pattern of possibilities, many of which would lead to a dead-end or take you way of course. Fortunately for us, the primary piste turned out to be fairly easy to navigate, and the Landie handled extremely well, more so after I fine-tuned the perfect tyre pressures on different surfaces.

Passing through isolated villages, we quickly established a daily desert routine, though we could never quite get used to the Sahel "bastard grass", that contains thousands of tiny thorned seeds that stick to everything and feel like miniature splinters. And the bugs, so many so that I had to pull out the mosquito net in order to just sit outside under the awning (I hadn't had to do this since crossing the Pantanal on the edge of the Amazon in Brazil). Quite a surprise.

But it was amazing, crossing that distance with its real sense of isolation, particularly as we came across a desert oasis - I now understand a bit better how it would feel to find one after getting lost in the sand as you see in the movies. Suddenly, palm trees and water would appear as if out of nowhere, seemingly incongruous with the miles of sand all

around. And a good place to camp.

As we neared the end of this section, we arrived at the Chad/Niger border. After finding the relevant official in the tiny village there, who was sleeping at home as it was Sunday, we completed the paperwork. We also chatted to them about their broken water pump. Given that this was their only means to access the subterranean wells, it was pretty serious. Unfortunately, we were not carrying



Time for beer in Agadez...

the drill they needed, so we offered them a lift onto Ngumi, some 30km up the track, to find one. They eventually declined after some discussion, with an alternative solution in mind. Life in the desert can be taxing!

As we crossed southern Niger on mixed roads to the town of Zinder, it was a good chance to find out a little more about the country we had just arrived in, Niger.

There are six main ethnic groups in Niger. The largest is the Hausa (56%), who are subsistence farmers in the south. The Songhai and Djerma make up 22% of the population; the Fulani and the Tuareg, 8% each; and the Beriberi-Manga, 4%. Niger's GNP in 1995 was about US\$1,900 million

continued on page 4...



Overlooking the waterfall near Timia in the Air Mountains

Global Expedition Update cont...

(World Bank estimate), equivalent to about US\$220 per capita, making Niger one of the world's poorest countries, with recent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) barely matching the growth of population. On reading this, I did ponder GDP as a measure of poverty. Many people on the planet live a subsistence lifestyle, and they are some of the happiest people I have ever met. Perhaps "poverty" should relate to the standard and difficulty of living, not the size of a financial income.



Playing with Dogon kids...

Nevertheless, economics remain important as a country without cash will find it hard to develop and create a better standard of living. The great majority of the people of Niger are subsistence farmers or pastoralists. In spite of the general aridity of the country, agriculture provides most of the national income, and this was decimated by the disastrous Sahel drought of the 1970s, and by less severe drought during the 1980s. Uranium was the major export throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but revenues dropped by almost 50 per cent between 1983 and 1990 with the decline in demand for uranium.

Niger had been hit hard, and without much time to recover, the more recent lack of rain has had some devastating effects, though I was interested to see no real evidence of this through the regions we visited, and we pondered this at length as we continued north to Agadez.

Agadez was an amazing town on the edge of the great Sahara desert and the gateway to the fantastic Air Mountains. As we strolled around the salt market, bustling with the arrival of a camel caravan, it was mad to experience something that has been effectively unchanged for centuries. We also stocked up on some local chewing tobacco that would make great gifts for local families we would visit on our journey into the mountains. [See the article on page 2 for more on the Air Mountains.]

Blown away by the our 4-day trip, deep into the desert and mountains, we enjoyed a final night of comfort with our lovely hosts, Akly & Celine, of the Auberge d'Azel in Agadez, before continuing south and west through Tahoua onto Niamey, Niger's capital. There, we prepared for the next sojourn into the sand, a route that would follow the banks of the Niger River north into Mali, then west to the legendary town of Timbuktu. Many people know the name, synonymous with the ends of the earth, but who knows where it actually is?

After 5 days of driving from Niamey, including a rest day for me to write the September News, we found out. Over 553 miles of sand, through tidy villages perched near the shores of the great Niger River, and some awesome camps, we pulled into town. As the dust settled and the sun set you could almost feel the vibe of history, as today this town is a shadow of its former self.

Mali's history is an ancient one of trade, wealth, and education. For centuries, the country's black

empires controlled regional trade routes. During medieval times, the famed city of Timbuktu was also a key centre of trade and Islamic learning.

We found ourselves a nice, small hotel with a rooftop view of town and the desert, and went on a night-out in Timbuktu...

A dinner of skinny chicken, several whiskey and cokes (no Jack sadly), and it was time to groove. Luckily, the restaurant owner told us of their new development, the first club in town, cool. Brand new everything, it was decked out well, it just needed some clientele. We were it, plus a few locals - and Heidi dancing on the bar was definitely a novelty.

Somehow, I managed to wake up for sunrise on the roof, and no, that's not because I hadn't been to bed, but perhaps thinking about how many times was I going to be in Timbuktu?

We pulled onto a small ferry to cross the Niger River and ran into a few other tourists, including an interesting French woman and teacher, happily travelling solo across Mali by pirogue (local boat). I also thought of a Swiss guy I had met in Namibia, who had built a raft, powered it using his motorbike mounted at its centre, and travelled 1,500km down the Niger River in Mali for 6 weeks. Amazing really!

Travelling south to Douentza, we had a definite near-miss as we catapulted over a rise on the dirt track. As the far side of the rise came into view, all I could see was a huge hole, big enough to swallow the Landie. With a fraction of a second to decide on the best line, luckily I took the right one and we bounced harmlessly out the other side. OK, I did make a bit of a dent in the side protection bar and one of the diesel jerry cans flew out of its metal restrainers and dented the bonnet, but all good thankfully.

We set up camp in Douentza, and listened to Mali music on the street. For thousands of years, Mandinke jalolu, or griots, (itinerant poet/musicians) composed and performed praise songs for Malian kings and warriors. Today, jalolu sing songs honouring wealthy business people, friends,

and other musicians. One example, Salif Keita, Malian singer and songwriter, popularly known as "the golden voice of Mali", whose combination of traditional rhythms and song with electronic instruments established him as an important figure on the world-music scene in the 1980s.

Through Mopti, the 'Venice of Mali', for lunch, we continued on south to the Dogon Country, and the stunning Falaises Bandiagara, spending a day



The pirogues of Mopti

to trek and explore more about this fascinating culture. [See article on page 8 for more on the Dogon.] Our Dogon guide, Kaou, was very proud to have been mentioned in 4 consecutive editions of Lonely Planet, and he was genuinely good.

We camped in the small Dogon village of Teli, enjoying some interesting debate with the villagers,; then explored several villages, and trekked up and over the escarpment cliffs, before stopping on the side of the road near the Burkina Faso border. We joked with the fun officials there, and chatted about the films I'm making. They then mentioned the major film festival held in Ouagadougou, our next destination and the end of an amazing desert month on expedition, but not before another near-miss...

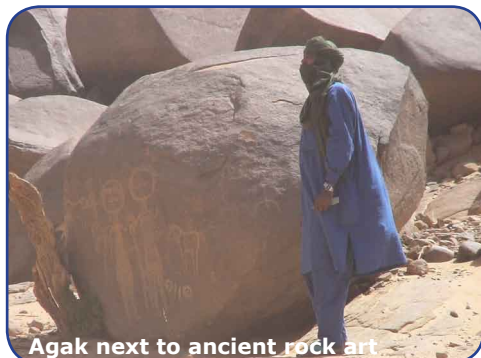
by Chris Charlton



A desert oasis north of Lake Chad

The Tuareg Peoples of the Sahara...

The Tuareg, indigenous people of the Sahara, are a Berber group with more than 300,000 living in Niger, Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, Libya, and Burkina Faso. They are primarily livestock herders who travel throughout the region in search of pasture and water. Although the camel is the first choice of transport, some groups of Tuareg men also ride horseback across the desert.



Agak next to ancient rock art

They speak a Berber language, Tamarshak, and have their own alphabet. In ancient times, the Tuareg controlled the trans-Saharan caravan routes, taxing the goods they helped to convey and raiding neighbouring peoples such as the Fulani.

From the 13th to the 16th centuries Niger served as an important trading crossroads for several African empires, including the Songhai

and Mali empires. The Tuareg people entered Niger from the north in the 11th century AD, and established the sultanate of Agadez on the Air Plateau in the 16th century.

Traditional Tuareg society is made up of nobles, vassals, and serfs. Slave-stealing expeditions have been abolished, but the black descendants of former slaves still perform the menial tasks. Social status is determined through matrilineal descent. Converted by the Arabs to Islam, partly as a result of the Fulani jihad which assisted the Islamic presence in the region, the Tuareg nevertheless have retained some of their older rites. It is the men, for example, not the women, who wear a headscarf with a veil.

Whilst it is forbidden by their culture to show their faces in public, Tuareg men cover their faces with a dark veil, or tagelmoust, revealing only their eyes, though younger generations are more relaxed about this, especially in private.

In modern times, raiding was subdued by the French who then ruled the region. The political division of Saharan Africa since the 1960s has made it increasingly difficult for the Tuareg to maintain their pastoral traditions and as a result have become semi-nomadic, with many permanent settlements found near Agadez.

Compounding the problems of political marginalisation (for example, as a minority group who make up about 8 per cent of Niger's population); many Tuareg starved during the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, which

decimated livestock numbers, and forced others to migrate in significant numbers to cities.

This eventually led to the Tuareg Rebellion of 1992-5, where the Tuareg increased attacks against government targets of several African states, seeking greater representation and an end to the oppression. Today, most Tuareg are happy to discuss this period openly and



Salt caravan arriving in Agadez

are comfortable with the peaceful, political outcome.

Fabulously hospitable and welcoming, the Tuareg people offer an intriguing insight into ancient traditions and desert culture; and you are unlikely to come away from an encounter without sipping on tea and viewing wonderful displays of intricately carved swords and silver jewelry...

Heidi does Desert with the Namaste Global Expedition...

I was immediately introduced to the African Sahara, beginning our route over the northern (dried-up) Lake Chad region. Amidst clouds of dust, sandy pistes and arid countryside, with little more than low lying brush, desert trees and endless miles of aggravating "bastard" grass, we gingerly bumped along our merry way. Traffic consists of the odd vehicle, usually loaded to the hilt with turban-toting characters, or large truck convoys carrying obvious surcharges of weight. The only signs of



Atop Heidi's dune in the Air Mountains

life to be seen along these areas are the herds of cows, or goats, sometimes accompanied by their shepherds, some on camels, but surprisingly, most on foot.

My first few days consisted of wrapping my head around the fact that I was indeed in Africa now. Not in bed dreaming, not watching some foreign film, not high & not hallucinating. I had most definitely dropped out of the sky, into a real desert adventure. And my body was quick to sort out any doubts I may have had about that by dehydrating itself, sorting out my bowels, allowing me to feel the effects of

heatstroke, as well as having zero tolerance for insect bites... Let's just say my acclimatisation to desert living was slightly exhausting to say the least, but once I got the hang of it though, the rewards & beauty well surpassed any adjustments that were thrown my way.

I don't exactly know where my fantasies of the desert stemmed from, be it old wild west flicks, where random desert travelers always seem to drag themselves out at the last minute, pleading for water; or maybe the likes of the famous Indiana Jones Trilogy (Harrison was so hot!); or maybe it's just my love of burying my toes in sand.... Nonetheless, once I actually came to terms with the fact that I was indeed doing something I had only ever fictionalized, I felt very empowered... knowing I was miles away from anything & anybody, any help or escape, chills ran through me. As a pretty sane person, you would think I would experience a sense of apprehension & uncertainty from such a realization, but rather, I felt nothing more than quintessential pride & invincibility. Even cutting through uncharted ground, or sinking the Landie into deep sand pools made me smile & think "Gee, this sure is pretty f*ck'en cool!". Who knows, maybe the heat was beginning to fry my brain too, that would also explain it...

Realistically, this trip was no ordinary vacation. It actually doesn't qualify as a vacation at all. The hours of non-stop driving are long, the day's heat can be unbearable, the insects can drive you mad, chewing you up, & leaving you to scratch their bites raw... The scenery is sometimes monotonous, the roads are mostly non-existent. Day after day, week after week, I began to realize that perhaps this was to be more appropriately seen as an endurance test, a gauge used to measure my strengths & weaknesses, that until now hadn't been pushed to their limits...

Don't get me wrong though, I have enjoyed every second of it! The impressive variety and vastness of the desert is what makes up its charm and its mystery. Its practically a whole other universe. Differences in the vegetation from one section to the next, & wavering landscapes from region to region, let you envision travelling from one barren planet to another.

By far my very dearest moment was climbing



Heidi "catching some rest" in Timbuktu

to the top of a dune, straddling its mound and overlooking a sea of fine sand. The dunes take on such exquisite swells, resembling an orgy of intertwined bodies of undetermined extremities and indefinite suggestions. The brilliant light of the setting sun caressed the sand as the moon took her place in the starry night sky. Everything moved in such harmony, yet for me, time stood still. This panorama will undoubtedly represent the desert for me forever...

by Heidi Bliedung

Trekking in the Dogon Region of Mali...

Extending some 150km through the Sahel to the east of Mopti, the huge Falaise de Bandiagara (Bandiagara Cliffs) in Mali forms the dramatic centrepiece of the homeland of the fascinating Dogon people, whose culture and lifestyle has largely unchanged in the last 1,000 years.

The landscape is stunning, and the Dogon people are noted for their complex and elaborate culture, art forms and unique houses and granaries. The



Looking west along the Bandiagara Escarpment and the ancient granaries...

best way to see Dogon Country is on foot. Treks along the escarpment, which is up to several hundred metres high, can last from half a day to a week. Easy options take you along the bottom of the escarpment, while the more interesting routes head up and down the cliff itself, winding through caves, scrambling over boulders and climbing up ladders carved from logs to cover the steepest sections. Views are magnificent and interaction with the village communities provides a lasting memory.

Living as they have for centuries, the 300,000 members of the Dogon culture group inhabit hundreds of villages in central Mali. The villages are scattered across 12,950 square kilometres (5,000 square miles), with many located along the sheer Bandiagara sandstone escarpment. These cliffs protect houses, sanctuaries, fetishes and other structures that for centuries have been an integral part of the Dogon culture.

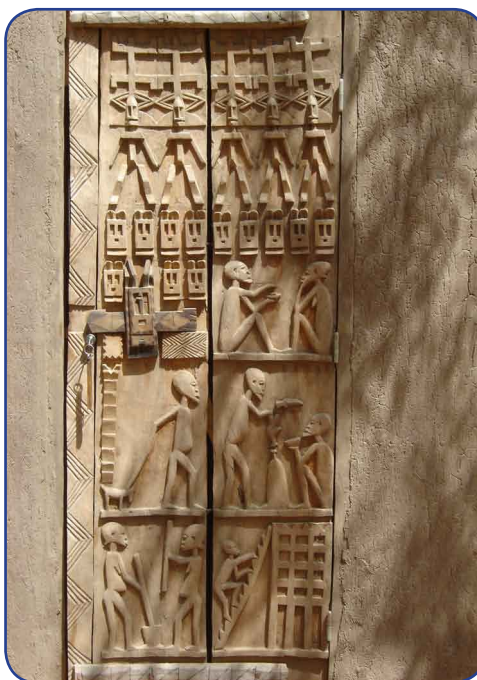
Although Islam and Christianity have won adherents among the Dogon, often through simple bribery, the group has largely held onto traditional religious beliefs.

Historically, families have been large. This is partly because parents have many children to ensure that they get help in the fields and in their old age. However, urban families are becoming smaller. The extended family generally maintains strong ties, and even distantly related family members are expected to help each other when needed. The

authority of the head of the family or clan chief is incontestable. Babies receive a lot of affection, but older children are given less attention. Older people are greatly respected.

Houses are made of mud, which disintegrates under heavy rain, and roofs are often damaged by wind storms. Crops depend on sufficient rain, and surpluses are rare. Outside the cities, few households have electricity or running water, and even in the cities these services are frequently interrupted. The average wage earner supports ten people.

Individuals usually accept the judgment of their families in the choice of a marital partner. Marriage rules are strongly influenced by Islam, but women are less dependent on their husbands than in some other Muslim countries because they can, under certain conditions, divorce their husbands and rejoin their families. Polygamy is still practised (as allowed by Islamic law), but has become less common - partly because of the economic burden and partly because many women in urban areas no longer accept the status of second, third, or fourth wife. A Muslim man who wishes to take another wife usually seeks the approval of his first wife and then must provide for all wives (up to four) equally.



One of the many intricate door carvings, typical of Dogon houses...

The Dogon interpreted this literally, and in the words of one village chief, "therefore impossible to adhere to...!"

Central to Dogon life is the cultivation, preparation and storage of their staple crop, millet. Each village contains many clay granaries filled with millet. Each day, millet is spread on the ground or in wood mortars and pounded into flour by women using long wooden pestles called kuni-i. The powdered

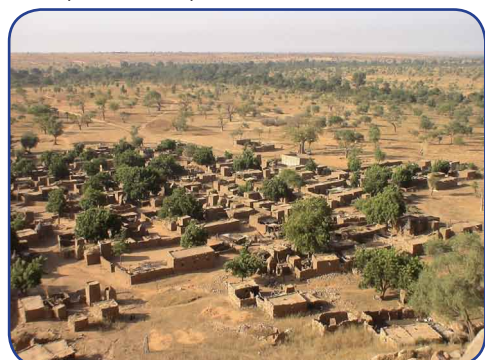


Village life revolves around the cultivation, preparation and storage of millet crops...

grain is cooked into porridge or made into millet beer, which the women brew in large clay pots and sell at local markets.

Ritual dances are also an important part of Dogon culture. Masks representing various characters, spirits, and gods are used for funeral rites and other ceremonies. The Sigi ceremony, which takes place only once every 60 years, is the principal spiritual event in the Dogon community. The timing is dictated by the movements of Sirius' three stars.

Whilst the majority of Dogon culture is fascinating to understand, one aspect, as with many other cultures in West Africa, remains a problem. Female genital mutilation, or excision as it is locally known, is still prevalent and practiced by the Dogon, despite, for example, becoming illegal in Mali. It simply is not enforced as it has become deeply engrained in local culture. The effect is to remove parts of the female genital, including the clitoris and even labia, when girls are aged around 8 years old. Aside from the horrific medical side-effects, from infection to pain, even death, the underlying origin of the procedure is fundamentally degrading to women - sexual pleasure is for men, not for women. Discussions with modern Dogon men about the issue, however, rarely reveal such a cause, rather an excuse that they don't really know its origins. Time for the Malian government to push harder for change, which can only be effected through the chiefs of each village community...



Overlooking the mud-brick village of Teli from the Bandiagara escarpment...



Traditional Hogon house, the high priest of the Dogon village community...



Looking across the maze of thatched rooftops of a traditional Dogon village...

People

Fellow Adventurers...



Patrick Devy, 43, from South Africa, joined the expedition for 17 days through Uganda, Sudan, CAR and Chad; joining Chris for the epic pioneering route across Central Africa which ended in N'Djamena.



Heidi Bliedung, 33, from Canada, began her 10-week journey on expedition in N'Djamena in Chad on 4 October.



Agak & Dami, from Niger, accompanied the expedition through the Air Mountains and Tenere Desert of northern Niger.



Kaou, 35, from Mali, accompanied the expedition during the tour of the Dogon region of the Falaises Bandiagara in Mali.

Along the way...

A big thank you to all those people who we've met along the way in October, including:



Azzo (Bangui), German archeology / botany team (N'Djamena); desert villagers around Lake Chad; Akly, Celine, Dami, Agak, Mohammed, Ali, Norwegian Red Cross guys, Nicole & Sylvie (Agadez), comedy Malian embassy officials (Niamey), Amanar restaurant & nightclub owner and staff, French teacher, Ali (Timbuktu), street vendors (Mopti), Kaou, Adi & villagers from Teli, kiwi chicks (Dogon region), Danny (Ouagadougou);



and of course, all the wonderful and countless inquisitive kids on route and everyone who we can't remember their names...



In the News

In the News

See www.namaste.co.uk/news for details...

Previous Newsletters

Previous issues of Namaste News are also available at www.namaste.co.uk/news

Sep 2005 Aug 2005 Jul 2005
Jun 2005 May 2005 Apr 2005

Letters & Emails

Thank you for all your letters, emails, text messages, and faxes. Each month, a few excerpts will be printed here...

"How are you? I'm quite fine. Our autumn holidays just began. Two weeks. I'm really looking forward because in the 2nd week I'm going to spend my time with my friend in Turkey - Kemer. It's a very small town, near to Antalya...I'm really looking forward to hear from you..." Nina, Germany

"I am glad to hear from you, in fact I always check your web site, and I do see the current location, and the rover's movement. Do update me always in your locations and I am interested in journey I wish I am the one moving with you. Otherwise all in ok in Yambio South Sudan. I wish you all the best. Your friend in Yambio", Richard, Sudan

"So wonderful to hear from you, as always... It's so funny, today, I was telling our tale to a friend and I see an email from you in my inbox when I got home. I love that. Glad you got the photos...it was a blast. Could get used to that. News update coming soon..." Odessa, Canada

"Great to hear from you! I'm a bit under the weather with Fresher's flu but uni's awesome, well perhaps not as good as Africa, a different time of awesome! Really could do with some sleep though, three weeks of not stop drinking & late nights is taking its toll...Listening to your route, I'm so jealous. Part of me still wishes I'd taken another year off and carried on. Only thing is I'm sure I wouldn't have returned and ran out of money far too quickly! Hopefully there's plenty of time to travel later..." Em, England

"Thanks for having the news letter sent. Great article, really enjoyed reading it, and stunning photo's. Patrick only now starting to recover, his foot really turned nasty and the Doc thought he may lose it. As it is he is just going to have to have skin grafts done. And what ever strain of Malaria they have up there it is really bad. Fourteen days after starting treatment he was still testing positive...We have just returned from the North... Shit has just hit the fan up there. LRA hit three different NGO vehicles in a space of two days, killing three people, Patrick went through the one ambush, and the day before we drove through the area where they had the second incident. So all NGO work just came to a grinding halt, can see this is going to affect our work badly...Patrick says to tell you "Just remember the road will get better"... Keep well Chris and please do keep in touch and let us know how it is all going, really curious about the conditions you are now experiencing as opposed to Sudan, CAR & Chad..." Lyn & Patrick, Uganda

Website Update

Stage 2 Development

The first Namaste Management Guides (Project Management Series; Leadership & Management Series) and Namaste Fun Films (Climbing Denali; A Taste of North America) are now in production; and should become available soon.

October 2005 Stats

Hits: 31,176
Countries: 57
Downloads: 3,062 Mb

September 2005 Stats

Hits: 36,173
Countries: 56
Downloads: 3,231 Mb

Timbuktu & Mopti

Timbuktu, that legendary town long synonymous with the ends of the earth, lies on the southern edge of the Sahara, just north of the great bend of the Niger River. It is connected with the Niger by canals and is served by the small river port of Kabara. The city is a regional trade centre for salt and other basic commodities including cotton textiles, leather goods, and pottery.



Timbuktu

By the early 14th century Timbuktu was a leading terminus of trans-Saharan caravans and a distribution point for trade along the upper Niger River. After it was conquered by the powerful Songhai Empire in 1468, the city reached its zenith as a commercial and religious centre. Merchants from northern African cities traded salt and cloth for gold and for African slaves in the markets. The school organized at the city's Sankoré mosque was staffed by scholars educated in the leading Islamic academies of the Middle East. In 1591 invaders from Morocco captured Timbuktu, and thereafter the city declined, partly because of raids by Bambara, Fulani, and Tuareg peoples and partly because commerce was diverted to other cities.

Mopti, known as the "Venice of Mali", is located in a vast inland delta region on three islands, linked by dykes, and is one of the most densely populated areas in the country. Originally a small fishing village, Mopti's position on the Niger River, halfway between the administrative centres of Bamako and Gao, meant it became commercially important as trade increased



Mopti

during the colonial period.

Steeped in such history, both cities remain fascinating to explore...

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GLOBAL EXPEDITION

Join the expedition in Africa

for an adventure of a lifetime...

Namaste!

Welcome to the Africa Plan of the Namaste Global Expedition, an amazing around the world adventure. Join me on the expedition for a weekend, a week, a month or longer, and it is up to us to decide what we want to do.

Click here to download the full Africa Plan PDF (to be updated monthly), which should give you some idea of the expedition plan for Africa, though this is subject to variation depending upon conditions, politics and what you would like to do. You will also

find other info documents for more detail, including how to join the expedition.

If you need anything more, please don't hesitate to contact me, by email, fax or phone. I look forward to your suggestions and ideas; and travelling with you soon...

Cheers, Chris



Africa Route Plan

Africa. This vast and diverse continent of 53 countries stretches from the Cape of Good Hope to the shores of the Mediterranean. Encompassing the world's largest desert and one of its most extensive rainforests, it is the adventurer's last frontier. Whether it's the stunning wastes of the Sahara Desert with its barren mountains, the inspiring beauty of snow-capped Kilimanjaro rising sheer from the East African plateau, the lush, mist-covered volcanoes and lakes of Kenya's Rift Valley, colourful tribal peoples, or the lure of ancient Egypt, this continent has them all. And of course, the large numbers of big game that still roam the plains of this fascinating land make Africa the king of safari...



This route plan is a guide only. The exact routing will be determined on the ground depending upon conditions, politics, and accessibility...

CLICK HERE TO
DOWNLOAD THE FULL
NAMASTE GLOBAL
EXPEDITION AFRICA
PLAN

Highlights...

Perhaps nowhere in the world will you find such a variety of cultures, vistas, contrasts and contradictions, cities ancient and modern as in Africa. From the snow-capped peaks of Kilimanjaro and Mt Kenya, to the scorching heat of the desert; from the impenetrable jungles of the Congo, to the silver-sanded beaches bordering the Indian Ocean.

Some of the planned highlights include:

May 2005

Time to explore gorgeous Cape Town, built on the peninsula of the Cape of Good Hope with Table Mountain as a backdrop before heading north through the western Cape to the Tswalu Kalahari Reserve & rhino sanctuary...

June 2005

Exploring Namibia's incredible landscapes from the Fish River Canyon in the south to the Skeleton Coast in the north; from the Namib Desert in the west to the Caprivi Strip in the northeast. Touring the Okavango Delta, Makgadikgadi pan & diamond mines of Botswana on route to Victoria Falls...

July 2005

Touring south through eastern Botswana and southern Zimbabwe, through South Africa's legendary Kruger National Park, before exploring Mozambique's Indian Ocean coastline. Then north through Malawi, often known as 'little Switzerland' owing to its beauty...

August 2005

Across the great plains of Tanzania before climbing Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest at 5,895m (19,340 ft). Then to the coast for some relaxation and diving on Zanzibar before a journey inland through Kenya's incredible game parks, including Tsavo & the Masai Mara. And in both countries, a chance to see much of the Great Rift Valley, one of Africa's most spectacular sights...

September 2005

After a journey in the deserts of northern Kenya; a chance to meet the famous gorillas on the border of Uganda and the Congo. Discovering the equatorial jungle of northwest Uganda, southern Sudan before heading west to explore exotic butterflies and the pygmies of the Central African Republic (CAR).

October 2005

Highlights include a visit to the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, once the centre of one of the ancient Mossi kingdoms; the famous red, white and black Volta rivers; historic Mopti, the 'Venice of Mali' founded in the 13th century and the legendary Timbuktoo; and experiencing the unique lifestyle of the nomads of Niger...

November 2005

Through Togo to the Gold Coast of Ghana, before heading north through Ivory Coast to the mountains of Guinea and onwards to the Atlantic coast of the Gambia and Senegal, before turning north across the Adrar plateau of Mauritania along the western Sahara...

December 2005

A tour of the length of the Atlas Mountains and ancient cities of Morocco. Then crossing into Spain and France for Christmas and returning to Tunisia in North Africa for New Year...

January 2006

Exploring Roman ruins of coastal Libya; and the pre-historic wonders of its Fezzan region. Then into Egypt to explore the the Gif Kebir plateau, the Nile river region, Cairo and the pyramids, before crossing into Jordan, Syria and the Lebanon on route to Turkey...

www.namaste.co.uk/africa.htm

Namaste!

Welcome to the Europe & Middle East Plan of the Namaste Global Expedition, an amazing around the world adventure. Join me on the expedition for a weekend, a week, a month or longer, and it is up to us to decide what we want to do.

Explore this guide (to be updated monthly), which should give you some idea of the expedition plan for the region, though this is subject to variation depending upon conditions, politics and what you would like to do. Explore the other info

documents for more detail, including how to join the expedition.

If you need anything more, please don't hesitate to contact me, by email, fax or phone. I look forward to your suggestions and ideas; and travelling with you soon...

Cheers, Chris



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Europe & Middle East Route Plan

The Middle East is where three continents meet, where empires have waxed and waned, merchants have long traded and warriors have long clashed. The result is a region rich with the accumulated detritus of five millennia's worth of major civilisations and cultures, from the Pyramids of Egypt to the Roman desert cities of Jordan & Syria, all set amid amazing scenery and landscapes. From Cairo to Istanbul; circumnavigating the Black Sea; climbing Europe's highest peak, Mt Elbrus, in the Caucasus; before a tour of fascinating Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans, a treasure-trove of history, culture and natural beauty awaits those who decide to come along for the ride...

Other Info

How to Join the Expedition About the Expedition Vehicle About the Expedition Guide

Click on the above documents to read; or visit the Global Expedition web page where you can download them (www.namaste.co.uk/namaste-global-expedition.htm)



Ancient Petra in Jordan...



The Caucasus Mountains...



Great Mosque in Damascus...



Stunt riding in Hungary...



Zadar on Croatia's Aegean Coast...



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What's next...



**November
2005**

**Ancient
Mauritania**

**The Coast
of Gambia &
Senegal**

**December
2005**

**Western
Sahara**

**Atlas
Mountains of
Morocco**

**January
2006**

**Mediterranean
North Africa**

**Across the
Middle East:
Cairo to
Istanbul**

Plus the usual Global Expedition Update...

www.namaste.co.uk/news