"First Impressions of Timbuctoo"

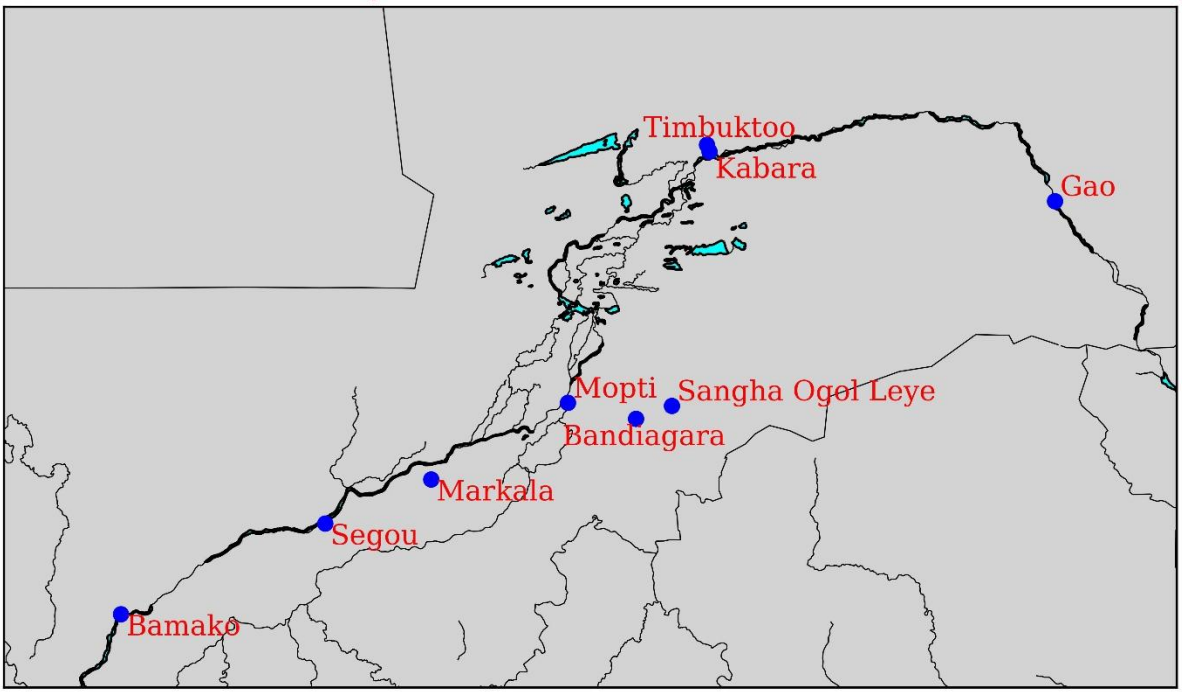
MLW 1964

Introduction

Soon after my father's posting as Ambassador to Mali in 1964, my mother Margaret Lee Waterfield (nee Thomas) visited Timbuctoo (or 'Timbuktu' as it is normally spelled now). She kept a manuscript diary which she typed up soon after, and this is the resulting document, re-typed by me.

As she writes, "`To understand where we went, you really need to look at a map of Mali, taking note of Mopti, the great curve of the river north and east from there to Timbuctoo and Gao, and of course Bamako as our starting and ending place.`"

Here is the necessary map:



But this is if looking from the start and end point of the trip, Bamako where we lived; maybe I should not have assumed knowledge of where Mali is in Africa:



I was left behind (aged 4) and rather minded. It seemed like a splendid adventure and not one to be missed out on (not to mention the idea of my mother going off on holiday without me!).

It is perhaps odd that she went without my father, but I assume he had Ambassadorial duties. I was in the care of my nanny, Joan.

I have retyped it as-is preserving spellings (American!), typewriter-font and line-lengths, but not the line-spacing or page-length (HMG foolscap!). If I have silently corrected some typos, I have probably introduced some others, irritatingly, sorry. I ignored x-ed out type where corrections were made.

On the whole the experience was not one of Darkest Africa, but still perhaps more than a tourist now would want to endure. And with Mali completely off-limits ("FCDO advises against all travel to the whole of the Mali due to the unpredictable security conditions. If you're in Mali, you should leave immediately by commercial flight if you judge it safe to do so."[1]) this offers at least a vicarious experience, as well as some historical insights.

JTW
Oxford May 2026

[1] https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mali May 2026

Bamako,
Sunday, November 8

"First Impressions of Timbuctoo"

Hurrah, our expedition of six made it to Timbuctoo and had a wonderful 10 days' trip - rough traveling but very worth it. We were an assorted Anglo-American party: Moya King, wife of the American chargé-d'affaires, Charlie and Julie Steadman (3rd Secretary of the American Embassy), Richard Burges Watson, (1st Secretary of our Embassy), me, and Ronnie Winston, 24 year old son of Harry Winston, the New York diamond millionaire. Ronnie had arrived in Bamako the day before we left, to look into his father's diamond mining interests at Kenieba in western Mali, and was added onto the party at the last moment. A very useful addition too, as he turned out to be very good company, intelligent and interested in everything, and besides that a useful relief driver and a fair mechanic on Land-Rover problems. We had two Land-Rovers and one Malian chauffeur, who shared the driving with the three men of the party.

To understand where we went, you really need to look at a map of Mali, taking note of Mopti, the great curve of the river north and east from there to Timbuctoo and Gao, and of course Bamako as our starting and ending place. We estimated that we covered altogether 2,000 miles in the ten days, and were continually amazed by the size and variety of Mali.

We congregated here at our residence on Wednesday, October 28, after lunch, and packed the two Land-Rovers with everything we might possibly need, including a complete assortment of tinned food, what seemed like a massive quantity of bottles of water, and every possible kind of drink. The first afternoon we had an easy and uneventful run to Markala, through flat and rather uninteresting country (it looks very like west Texas). We spent the night at the campement in Markala, which, though better than most other campements, is fairly typical: rooms with two beds in each one, hard straw mattresses, but mercifully the beds all equipped with mosquito nets (an absolute essential here), and Malian boys prepared to produce an evening meal for us. In fact they produced a good one: capitaine (a Niger river fish rather like a trout but tasting

slightly muddy), followed by a stringy chicken with rice, and for dessert a dish of mango jam! It's one of the better legacies the French have left here: they have taught the Malians to cook; in spite of great shortages of supply and limitations of the kind of food available, every meal that we had on the trip was well cooked and tasted good. The other legacy, more boring, left by the French is the passion for form-filling: at every place we stopped we had to fill up a long form of who we were and where we were going. Some of the forms even asked for one's parents' names and birthdays!

Our second day was a near disaster, and the worst of the trip. We were aiming for Mopti, some 290 miles further east, where we would catch the river boat in the evening. It looked an easy distance to go, but Richard, who was the organizer of the expedition, luckily insisted that we should make an early start. Our first discovery was that a bolt holding up the springing on the under-carriage of the large Land Rover had broken- we limped with it into Segou, where we hoped to be able to get it fixed. After some two hours' delay, the mechanics at the garage did manage to repair it, a simple job the only difficulty of which was finding another bolt that would fit. There weren't any such bolts in Segou, but after Ronnie had spent a long time helping the men and becoming friends with them, one suddenly went off and came back in ten minutes with the right bolt. He wouldn't tell us where he had got it, and we think he must have stolen it off another Land Rover.

While all this was going on, Richard had gone off in the other Land Rover to call on the local officials, and to enquire about the state of the road ahead of us. The answer was that the road was under repair, and not open to traffic - unless one could get authorization from the local Minister of Transport. But he was not in Segou, he was 40 miles on up the road supervising the road works. So Richard and his Land Rover proceeded on up the road to find the vital man. By 11 o'clock our Land Rover was fixed and we followed and joined up with him - all well, authorization duly delivered, and we went on well pleased with ourselves to the ferry at Doura, which was just before the stretch of bad road. Then just as we pulled up to wait for the ferry, our Land Rover developed a flat tire. It was nearly the last straw: we

were stuck in the mid-day sun without a speck of shade anywhere in sight, and the crowd of Malian road workers who rallied round to help change the tire managed to take nearly an hour to get it done. While they were working, we scrounged amongst our supplies for some bread and salami sandwiches and cold drinks, realizing that we wouldn't have time to stop later for a decent picnic in the shade. But at last the tire was changed; we were dripping wet and rather cross, but went onto the little two-car ferry with a great deal of relief. The stretch of road beyond, for some 50 miles until we reached San, was incredibly bad; it goes through a low-lying area and each rainy season is flooded and in some places washed right away. As the rainy season is only just finished, it hadn't yet been put back in order - and nothing but Land Rovers could have got through. It was completely under water for some stretches, and the sides of the road were littered for miles with the corpses of lorries which had failed to get through. We crept along quite happily, though, and got into San at 3.30 in the afternoon. There we had to stop to get our punctured tire mended, as we couldn't risk going on the 110 remaining miles to Mopti without a spare. By the time we were ready to go again, we realized we would have to make top speed, down more fairly rough road, if we were to have a chance of catching the boat, which we thought sailed at 8 p.m. We drove as fast as we dared, through more west-Texas type landscape - very hot and dusty, with scrubby trees and bushes and great herds of humped cattle. The only incident came as we were nearing the outskirts of Mopti, after dark, when Ronnie, who was driving the lead car at about 60 m.p.h., nearly mowed down a row of African women who were walking down the road abreast with calabashes balanced on their heads. It seemed funny afterwards, but was a very narrow escape. We went slightly more slowly from then on, and drew up by the dock in Mopti at 7.30 precisely. The boat actually sailed at 7.45, so we were lucky to have made it.

Our first sight of the boat, the "Liberte", was not reassuring, and more than one member of the party half wished that we had indeed missed it. Picture a Mississippi River steamboat kind of boat, with a deck and cabins on the top, and the lower deck completely open from side to side. The lower open deck (3rd class) packed like sardines with Africans, lying or sitting on their baggage rolls,

and accompanied by their chickens and goats. The whole boat was alive with Africans, all calling and shouting messages to their friends on the shore, or pushing and shoving up and down the narrow board that served as a gangplank. Many gave up trying to get onto the gangplank, and just waded through the river in their clothes to get onto the boat! Besides the pandemonium of shouting and movement going on, our first impression was of dirt and peeling paint everywhere. And the "Liberte" does not even go under its own steam: it has no engine at all, but is pulled by a tugboat at the end of a dubious looking rope.

In spite of our first impressions, we managed to push our way up the gangplank and get our baggage and stores handed on after us, only to find that there didn't seem to be anyone in charge of the boat, nobody knew who we were or what cabins we had, and confusion continued to reign. When we did get the cabins sorted out, we found them swarming with mosquitoes: luckily a man came around soon spraying an insecticide which killed them in droves (the dead ones lay in the basin in our cabin for the three days we were on the boat!). We were disappointed, after a day of non-eating and rushing down the road, to find there was no dinner served on the boat that night; but we got out some bread and pate from our stores, and after that and a strong drink of whisky began to feel much better.

And by the next morning, after a good sleep in our tiny cabins, we were completely altered and were talking about "our" boat and how wonderful it was. Like all boats, there were scenes of confusion at each port, but when we were being tugged down the Niger, all was peaceful and continually interesting. In our three days on the boat, we covered some 600 miles down the river and had a grandstand view, from deck chairs at the front of the top deck, of the immensity of the river and the country and of the sparseness of the population. We were the only Europeans aboard, but apart from having our own company, conversed warmly with all the first-class and some of the second-class Malian passengers. Various things stand out about the boat: how all the Moslems aboard (which means most of the passengers) spread out their prayer rugs on the deck each day at sunset, so that we could hardly move about or get into or out of our cabins till the prayers were finished; how we thought it was cold one evening and put on sweaters, but when

Richard brought out his thermometer to check, we found that it was actually 89°; how the 2nd and 3rd class Malian women passengers, who had to sleep on deck, managed to look after their tiny children in those conditions, so that one never heard a child crying; how the same women took their children ashore at each port and dunked them in the edge of the river, scrubbing them off with rough handfuls of straw; and on the lighter side, how Ronnie one evening had a bucket of refuse, which was being lowered from the top deck into the river, tipped over him by mistake.

And the continual fascination of the river and the riverbank. It looked best in early-morning and late afternoon light: in midday until the tropical sun, everything looked flat and parched and uninteresting, but when shadows appeared, and especially in the rose and violet light of sunset, the country was altered. We thought of Mungo Park's journal, and how he made the trip down-river in 1805, and felt civilized indeed in comparison.

For the first part of our journey we passed by frequent villages of the usual square flat-roofed mud house sort, but as we went on there were fewer and fewer villages or houses. We looked for hippopotami but didn't see any. Niafounke marked the beginning of the proper desert country: still mud houses, and an old French fort, but the land completely sandy with palm trees and camels. And the first inhabitants we had seen who weren't negroes, but lighter-skinned - of Arab descent, some however mixed for generations with the local negro tribes. There are so many races, tribes, and mixtures of them together, that I still cannot sort them out, but was strongly impressed by the number of different facial characteristics, styles of dress, styles of hairdo, and so on. One particularly attractive little girl of about 10 at Niafounke stood shyly and patiently on the shore by the boat for the hour that we stopped there, holding an enamel bowl of 8 eggs that she hoped to sell. She was nicely dressed in a long green close-fitting dress, with gold earrings and a gold ring, and her kinky black hair plaited in short braids all over her head: at the end of each plait a silver coin was fastened flat against her head. I was glad to see that she sold her eight eggs just before the boat left, to one of the ship's officers, who dropped one of them and broke it coming up the slippery gangplank.

On the morning of Saturday, October 31, we arrived at 8.30 at Kabara, the port for Timbuctoo. We were disappointed to learn that the boat was to sail again at 11.30, because Timbuctoo is 8 miles from Kabara and we were pressed for time. Luckily we had all taken the precaution of buying our Timbuctoo postcards in Bamako and writing them on the boat shortly before we arrived: otherwise we would have had time to do nothing but our correspondence while we were there!

We all fell in love with Timbuctoo, though it is really more an historical monument than a thriving town. We drove in on a local bus, through sand dunes and thorn bushes, with herds of goats skipping about; the day was crisp and dry and sunny, and not yet too warm. The bus stopped first at the post office, where we made haste to buy stamps and post our correspondence, then we had time to look about us. We were fascinated to find a camel tethered in front of the post office, while his owner did business inside. At this point we acquired a charming and intelligent little boy of about 10, dressed in a flowing blue robe and carrying his European-style school satchel over his shoulder, who became our guide for the sights. For the next two hours we followed him through the broad sandy streets. Sand, sand, and again sand. Even the floors of the houses, which are of the flat-roofed adobe type, are of fine sand. We inspected the two mosques, curious adobe structures with cone-like towers, from which project irregularly on all sides strange wooden poles; the effect is rather like a hedgehog crossed with a child's attempt to build a pyramid. And we looked at the three famous houses in Timbuctoo: the house of Rene Caille, the Frenchman who was the first European, in 1828, to come to Timbuctoo and get back to Europe to tell the tale; the house of Major Gordon Laing, a Scot, who got there first, in 1825, but was murdered before he got away again; and the house of Heinrich Barth, a German scientist who came later, in the 1850' s, but discovered much more about Timbuctoo than had previously been known in Europe. We were taking photographs of everything all the time, though without permits. In Mali, one is only allowed to photograph by permission, and although we applied for permission shortly after we arrived, no permits have yet been issued to us. We were thus taking some chance of having our films confiscated, but no one there asked any questions. Indeed they mostly ran away from us, especially the women, who hid their faces in their robes

and giggled and turned away and begged us not to photograph them; when we asked our little guide why they didn't want to be photographed, he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Mais, c'est la coutume." He answered for it that the children wouldn't mind being photographed, so we took a lot of photos of children and buildings and ourselves, and only took the grown-ups when we thought they weren't looking.

We went on to the market, which was again a fascinating mixture of people, from Bela slaves to Tuaregs, the nomadic warrior tribe from the desert to the north: they wore long blue or white robes, carried spears, and had daggers at their waists. The ladies of our group were looking for "Timbuctoo gold" jewelry, which we soon found - it is made of bright yellow straw, wound about a base of wax or clay substance in the shape of beads, which are then made into necklaces and bracelets; at a price of 150 Malian francs (about 4 shillings or 50 cents) for a necklace, they make a very attractive and colorful souvenir.

We met up again with Richard and Charlie in the market; they had gone to pay calls on officials, and had got hold of Frank Marshall, an American Baptist missionary, who with his wife were the only Europeans we saw at all while we were there. They have been in Timbuctoo since 1952, and have lived there longer than any other Americans, except his brother who is also a missionary and has been there a little longer than he has. Frank Marshall had a jeep station wagon, into which we all squashed, as he offered to drive us around to see the outskirts of Timbuctoo. We went up to the northern section, where we saw the camels at the water hole (one nearly bit Richard while he was photographing it), and the large tablets of rock salt (they weigh about 80 pounds each and look exactly like gravestones) which are brought down by camel from Taodeni in the north. By now it was 11 o'clock, the sun was beating down, and we were beginning to feel dry and parched. Mr. Marshall took us by his house, a small suburban western-style house on the south edge of town, and his wife really saved our lives by giving us tall glasses of ice-cold limeade. Nothing had ever tasted so good to us. Unfortunately we couldn't stay to talk to Mrs. Marshall, as we had to get back to the boat, so we squashed into the Marshall station wagon and away we went. It was very kind of him to take us about, as there are very few vehicles of any sort in

Timbuctoo, and most of those there are official governmental jeeps and trucks.

When we got back on the boat, we felt as if we had come home. We were sad to say goodbye to Timbuctoo, but glad to be back on the cool river for the last lap of our trip - around the great bend or the Niger and south to Gao, about a 36 hour trip from Timbuctoo. We passed now through much more desert-y country: sand dunes on both sides of the river, and palm trees, and very scattered nomadic habitations made of straw and thatch. Camels and donkeys and semi-wild horses. The broad stretches of the river are edged with great expanses of edible marsh grass, and strangely enough the horses stand right in the water to graze. And birds, always birds, of every colour, size and type. Everywhere we went on the trip we were exclaiming constantly at the beauty of the birds, and on this section of the river they were the most frequent type of life we saw. ln the evenings we would see enormous flocks of birds in the distance, so thick and far away that they looked like a fast-moving cloud of smoke.

On Saturday evening just as we were going to bed we made an unscheduled stop, as a passenger wanted to get off. We drew into a nearly deserted mudbank, where there were three mud huts and three men and a boy waiting for the boat. No lights of any kind on the shore, but everything was shown up brilliantly by the boat's spotlight. A desolate dune area, with great enormous jumping frogs. There was great difficulty in getting the boat alongside the shore - they threw the anchor onto the bank, but the three men and a boy were not strong enough to hold it and keep the boat from drifting out into the river again. Much shouting and gesticulation back and forth. In the end a pirogue (long slender fishing boat which one sees all up and down the river) came alongside to take the passenger ashore. He was a tall impressively built Negro in a long flowing green robe and a gold fez, no doubt some local chieftain. His luggage consisted of two cloth-tied bundles, a rolled-up prayer mat, an earthenware pot - and a transistor radio. With much shouting of farewells in an unknown tongue, he went off in the pirogue and we drifted away down-stream again.

Sunday, our last day on the boat, passed peacefully and uneventfully - more and more enormous stretches of uninhabited area,

and vast reaches of river. We had discovered by now the advantages of having no engine on our boat: there was no noise or vibration at all, and the whole trip was as peaceful as floating in a millpond. As the day went on we regretted more and more having to leave the boat that night, as we had become so attached to it. True that the lavatories were disgustingly dirty, and we didn't dare wash ourselves because the water on the boat is drawn up from the river, which is said to be unsafe. But we had plenty of bottled water and canned fruit juices with us for drinking, and in French style were served with free wine at every lunch and dinner - and to offset the discomforts we had the glorious adventure of seeing everything.

We arrived at Gao at about midnight, and went ashore to the Hotel Atlantique, the only hotel in Gao and it has only about eight rooms. It was far dirtier than the boat, and Gao was far far hotter than anything we had experienced so far. Gao is historically a trading center where the desert and the countryside meet, in the same way that Timbuctoo is, but without the romantic connotations that have grown up around the name of Timbuctoo. Its population is about 15,000, of whom there are 20 Europeans, plus about 50 Russians who are working in mines some miles to the south of the town.

The one Englishman there is a boy who is just 18 (Hugh Jenkins), who has come out for a year of voluntary service to teach English. He is a tiny slim boy (less than John William's size) who looks about 14, but is mercifully very mature and with a good sense of humour. His students are all older than he is, as well as being twice his size, but he seems to have them under good control. He has been lucky to find very good American friends there - again Baptist missionaries, called Mr. and Mrs. Zimmerman - who are the only Americans there. Mr. Zimmerman, who has been there since 1952, is a splendid character with a mine of shrewd and funny stories about the local scene; and Mrs. Zimmerman, a motherly creature who is without her children (the two older boys are in school in the U.S. and their three girls, down to the age of 9, are in a Mission boarding school at Niamey in Niger) seems to have adopted Hugh as an extra child. Lucky for him. We all lunched with the Zimmermans on Monday, and she produced a veritable feast, with roast wild pig and masses of vegetables, hot home-made rolls, pineapple upside-down cake, and jugs and jugs full of cold limeade. We hadn't had such a good meal

since leaving Bamako, and all ate far too much. We went back to our rooms at the hotel to rest afterwards, but found it far too hot to get much rest.

In the late afternoon the Mayor's car and chauffeur came to drive us around to see the sights. There are not many, in fact - an old mosque, said to be 500 years old, which we climbed to the top of, and the tombs of the Askia emperors, who ruled Gao in the days of the Songhai empire about 500 years ago. And a modern sight, of which the people are very proud - a new abattoir, built by the Yugoslavs. Impressive-looking and finished, but not in use as it is still lacking a vital piece of machinery to make it go. They hope the abattoir will be a great step forward, as they plan to send refrigerated meat by trucks across the Sahara to the north. There is plenty of good beef in Mali, but the problem is of getting it out, and judging by what we heard of the roads across the Sahara, I shouldn't think the trucks would have a very high percentage of success. We met three Frenchmen from Algiers in the hotel, who had driven down across the Sahara in a Land-Rover: they had been eight days crossing the central part of the desert, where they said the road disappeared altogether for great stretches and they were simply driving through the sand.

As we were driving out into the country beyond the abattoir, in the violet evening light, we saw our most impressive sight of the trip: three Tuareg, with flowing robes and turbans, carrying their lances at the ready, galloping down the road on camels. It looked a scene out of a Hollywood spectacular movie. We were lucky in having the Mayor's chauffeur with us, because when we asked somewhat hesitantly if we could photograph, he ground the car to a halt and shouted at the camel men, who pulled up their camels and stood still, somewhat sulkily, while we clicked away with cameras.

Back to the hotel, where we had arranged a dinner party - for Hugh Jenkins and the Zimmermans, and a nice French couple who are also teaching in Gao. We sat down 11 at table, in the courtyard of the hotel under the tropical stars, and the hotel didn't do too badly with food, managing to produce a dish of brains in tomato sauce, followed by meatballs and spaghetti. We supplemented this by two fresh pineapples, which Ronnie had carried all the way from Bamako,

and an enormous magnum bottle of champagne, which Moya had brought in her suitcase from Bamako - as we had got to the end of the line, we thought it was the most suitable time to celebrate with the champagne. A very pleasant evening, and we were very touched next morning when Mrs. Zimmerman, who came to say goodbye to us, said that she hadn't been able to sleep the night before, as she had been so excited at having actually been out to a party. She couldn't even remember when she had last been out to a party, as the only parties in Gao are at their house when she has to do the cooking.

After saying our goodbyes at 7 a.m. Tuesday, we went out to the airport for the easiest part of our trip - a flight back to Mopti. Three hours got us there, over the same area that had taken us more than three days by boat.

Arrived at Mopti, we were pleased to be met by Bala, our chauffeur, who had the Land-Rovers all ready for the next part or our trip - a journey three hours east into the strange Dogon country. We were also met by Peter Makin, another 18-year-old English boy who is teaching English near Mopti. He seemed rather lonely, as he is sharing a house with two Russian teachers and there are no other English people in the area, so we asked him to come with us to see the Dogon. We set off after a quick lunch at the Mopti campement, reckoning to have plenty of time to get to the campement at Sanga, a Dogon village, before dark. But of course as luck would have it Richard's Land Rover got a puncture, which held us up for a while. And unfortunately the puncture happened too near Bandiagara, the administrative town of the Dogon area - by the time the car was fixed, we had attracted attention, and a policeman on a bicycle came to tell us we must report in to the police station to state our business. We protested that we were diplomats, and that our journey had been arranged with permission of the government in Bamako; but to no avail, we were still escorted along to police headquarters, where we all had to fill in forms, under protest, saying who we were and what our business was. Actually it didn't waste us much time, as we were meanwhile getting the punctured tire repaired at the garage. After a false start, when they had the tire mended and over-pumped it up so that it developed another hole, we finally had it fixed and were on our way again.

The journey from Bandiagara to Sanga was over very bad road, single track and strewn with great rocks and boulders, and going into wilder and wilder country. The landscape consists of an enormous cliff or escarpment stretching some 40 miles in length, with a rocky plateau above, and a great flat plain below, flat and featureless as far as one could see, The plateau is almost entirely of strange volcanic-looking rock, twisted or moulded into extraordinary shapes - it reminded me of what I would think the landscape of the moon must be like. And all amongst these strange rock shapes are built the habitations of the Dogan people; they are built of mud, but in irregular shapes blending in with the rocks, so that at times one can scarcely distinguish which are rocks and which are houses. The darkness had fallen long before we had finished our 25 mile drive across the top of the plateau; so we arrived at the village of Sanga, which is at the edge or the cliff, in pitch black night relieved only by a few torches carried by the villagers. We were escorted to the campement, which was primitive but, we were delighted to see, very clean. It has two bedrooms, with three mosquito-netted beds in each, with a central dining room which even had a refrigerator, in which we made haste to chill all our bottled drinks. We arranged ourselves in ladies' and men's dormitories, and Richard was delighted to volunteer to sleep on his camp bed in the open air. He regretted it before the night was out, though, as he was plagued by a swarm of mosquitoes in the middle of the night, and had to retreat inside one of the Land-Rovers, where he had no room to stretch out properly. The rest of us had a good night's sleep under our nets.

We were up at 7, when we had arranged for a guide to meet us to take us on the famous cliff walk to see the Dogon Villages built into the cliffs. We decided not to take the longest walk, or the shortest one, but the middle-sized one of about 7 kilometers, and indeed it proved to be about as much as we could have done. It sets off along the top of the cliff to begin with, then descends the cliff through a rocky valley - an easy descent, though it involved clambering down over boulders all the way. As we went down, we had on our left the cliff dwellings that the Dogons have lived in recently (they have mostly now moved to the base of the cliff, where they live in little mud-hutted villages), and towards the top of

the cliff the strange holes in the cliff formation that the Dogon use as their cemetery. They raise the bodies of the dead with ropes up the cliff face to the almost inaccessible holes, put the bodies inside, and close the fronts of the holes with slabs of rocks. On the other side of the valley we descended; we saw strange tiny cliff dwellings built high up the cliff wall, and completely inaccessible now. It is still a mystery who lived in them and when, and how anyone reached them. The local legend says they were inhabited by a pygmy tribe (a fair guess, since a normal sized person could hardly fit into them), and when we asked our guide how the pygmies reached their houses, he said some of them had had ropes. Also, he assured us seriously, some of the pygmies had been able to fly! During the whole of our walk, though we passed through three villages and greeted a large number of people, we found not a single one except our guide who understood a word of French. The Dogons have kept to themselves and refused to be assimilated - they are small and undernourished looking, with a slightly wild look in their eyes, and are very shy. We walked about 3 or 4 kilometers along the base of the cliff until we came to a cleft in the rock where we would make our ascent of the cliff. We found it not so difficult as it had looked, as they have built stone steps up the cleft, so it was just a matter of climbing some 200 feet of stairs. It was by now however 10.30 and the sun, which we were perforce in, was beating down fiercely. I would guess the temperature in the sun to have been around 110°, so we made slow work of getting up the cliff steps, and it was a great relief when we reached the top at last and headed back to the campement. There we made quick work of disposing of vast quantities of water, fruit juice and beer, and sat about feeling slightly dazed but pleased with ourselves. Our guide commended us too, and said that many foreigners arrived at the top of the cliff having to be carried away and revived. Lucky he didn't tell us that before we started!

Our great walk was over, but our adventures weren't, as we had another run-in with the local police. The local chef had sent word to us as we first started descending the cliff, saying we had to return to his office at once. We refused and went on walking, and three more times during the walk he sent emissaries to us saying we must return at once, and we kept sending messages back saying we would see him when we finished the walk. Richard and Charlie

accordingly went to his office when we got back, and found him very officious and difficult. As we had got permission from Bamako for our trip, we weren't legally bound to see him, but should politely have called on him, except for the fact that we didn't even know he existed. Equally the Foreign Ministry here, though telling us we could make the trip, had failed to notify the chef that we were coming. He however had heard that we were there, and had turned up especially early in his office to greet us, so he was in a high rage when we failed to come to see him. Richard and Charlie had a great argument with him for half an hour; first he threatened to make us leave the area within two hours, but when they said that was what we intended to do anyway, he shifted ground and said that we couldn't leave, he would imprison us there. Furthermore he said he would confiscate all the films out of our cameras, as we had been photographing without permission. We did have one permit, as Moya had a permit for her camera, so in the end Richard and Charlie showed him that permit, hoping at least to save her film. Rather surprisingly, he accepted that as permission for all our cameras, which if he had read it closely he would have seen it wasn't, so all our precious films of Timbuctoo and all were saved. He thawed out slightly after that, and graciously said we would be allowed to see the Dogon dancers perform that afternoon before we left.

Meanwhile up at the campement we had all been assiduously hiding our cameras, knowing full well that we hadn't the proper permits for them. Ronnie had even gone to the length of hiding his finished rolls deep in a sack of rice in the kitchen of the campement, feeling like James Bond as he did so. But we had no further trouble with films, and all clicked away merrily, photographing the dancers who performed for us after lunch. The dancers actually were disappointing, as they didn't know their steps very well, but their costumes and strange mask headdresses were most curious and interesting.

We left in mid-afternoon, got back to the campement in Mopti before dark, and that was really the end of our adventures. Moya and Ronnie flew back to Bamako the next morning, and the rest of us returned in the Land-Rovers, a trip of a day and a half. It was completely uneventful, without any breakdowns or even a flat tire; and the bad stretch of road, which had been so flooded

only 8 days before, was completely dried out and repaired and open to ordinary traffic. So we arrived back at our starting point; our house here, before 4 o'clock on Friday afternoon - all hot, dusty, dirty, and tired out, but feeling exhilarated all the sane by our ten day's "rest."

MLW 1964