

Resting Through the Hollow Hours

Ethan Gelber

We knew we would step off the bus in the wee-est hours of the morning, a long dark spell before the first sun-up taxi *baché* (pick-up truck) would take us the 30km to meet the first ferry across the Niger River to Djenné. We had been reassured that we would have no trouble resting through those hollow hours. Of course, we had envisioned such untroubled rest in beds surrounded by four walls and a roof securing us and our belongings from the chill night and wayward hands. How naïve!

Mali, a landlocked Sahelian country, spills south out of the Sahara's empty southern periphery and into the broad plains bordering the Niger River, Africa's third-longest waterway. My friend and I, brought to neighbouring Senegal by work, had impulsively decided to spend five days (not nearly enough time) on a rash scramble through some of the highlights of this land fabled as the home of Timbuktu. We knew we wouldn't get to Timbuktu itself; however, with no time to dawdle, upon arrival in Bamako, the capital city, we accepted the services of the first guide who found us (someone always does), an amiable and able young man known as Camille le Magnifique.

At first, Camille balked at our proposed programme, claiming rightly that it was too ambitious. But we were ambitious people and insisted. Since we were on a tight budget and would have to rely on local transport, he warned us about the discomfort of sometimes travelling late into the evening or even at night. Again, we were not to be swayed. Our backpacks were

light, our spirits unencumbered, our mettle undented. What could a few long bus rides deep into a dark African night do to an indomitable gusto for adventure, right?

And so we followed Camille as he finessed a bewildering transport system and secured seats on a late-afternoon bus headed east to the town of Mopti. We would alight several hours before the bus reached Mopti, at a road junction approximately 500km from Bamako. Our objective was a daybreak arrival at the historic city of Djenné, site of Mali's most famous mosque and market.

The bus ride was a test of pluck and patience, so often the case in Africa. A short time into the trip, the sun disappeared, and with it went the idle distraction of the land around us, melting into the deepening rural gloaming. Seated near the front of the vehicle, as the tunnel of darkness and crush of passengers pressed in tight, we stared through the windshield and felt like expiated souls plummeting into a forgotten lightless purgatory. The horizon, a smudged mauve outline dappled with rare, bare light bulbs or fires, was soon lost in pitch-black. The mesmerising faded road lines eventually vanished entirely. The bus was an isolated vessel, agitated by unseen forces, charging headlong into sensorial emptiness.

We must have dozed. Camille woke us with the hard edge of his voice. The bus had stopped. The door was open. There was nothing to be seen outside in the void. But he was adamant: this is where we must get off. We grabbed our

packs and stumbled out into a bracing nip. Apparently, we were at our crossroads. Our sleep-addled brains were too dull to grasp anything immediately.

However, as the bus rumbled away, down its ribbon of night, people and a place took shape in the shadows. A moonless sky thick with unfamiliar constellations. A tumble of small shacks, some caged in thin bars of light radiating from between irregular vertical wallboards. Clusters of shrouded figures tending to low ember-orange glows. Two shapes broke away from the nearest huddle and shuffled towards us. Camille swiftly intercepted and in a hushed mumble – the better not to further unquiet the stillness – seemed to be making arrangements. We assumed he was asking about one of the shacks, a temporary shelter for us until this deracinated nowhere became somewhere again.

When Camille returned, he was dragging several large pieces of cardboard. Helping him, we moved a short distance down the road, away from the huts and dim circles of light to a slight embankment, where we discovered a neat row of more spooled cardboard. He gestured to the ground before us. Here, he whispered. We should bundle ourselves in corrugated paper blankets, just as the others had done. It was then we realised that the other cardboard rolls were actually other people, Malians, enjoying untroubled rest, awaiting, like us, the first morning rides. According to Camille, most arrivals at this road junction avoid the shanty sanctuaries, where

the noise, light and drinking hold no promise of either repose or safe refuge. We too would join one rank of cardboard cannolis, securely self-patrolled by a changing watch.

It took a moment to get not-uncomfortable. We donned extra layers and tried to pad our limbs with sheets of newspaper. We experimented with wrapping techniques, resignedly reconciling ourselves to the roll-in like those around us. We turned away from the gleam of the shacks and the high beams of the rare night traffic. Lying on the light incline, settled, we contemplated our view: a colourless and contourless continuum, a monolithic nothingness, coated ink upon ink. Neither of us, both well travelled, had ever felt so far from home, from anywhere, from everywhere.

Dawn took the whole of the sky. In an instant the full bowl above slipped free of its veil. Crooked baobab tree outlines, frozen in place, hung with odd weight. The eerie early clamour of nature found new volume. An engine revved and Camille urged us into sad compressed seats in a shivering steel shell. We slowly revived, returned to our senses, and, once the gritty jalopy jolted into motion and gathered speed, found ourselves sluicing through sand like a sleigh through snow, back on the road to somewhere.

Ethan Gelber, never unhappily lost, has rolled on two wheels in 40 countries on five continents, including a circumnavigation of the Mediterranean Sea by bike.

PREVIOUS: The Great Mosque of Djenné is greatly revered and every year the whole town comes together to replaster its weathered walls in a joyous and vital festival of restoration.

OPPOSITE: Although the national highway is often flanked with vegetation close to the Nile, its ochre hue is a constant reminder of the nearby encroaching Sahara.

OVERLEAF: At night the massive walls of the Mosque cool down. Decorative ceramic caps placed over air vents and crafted by the women of the town can be removed to ventilate the interior.