

The road to Ouagadougou

FROM TRAVEL 1

A lifetime later, 35 kilometres south of Dori, we pull alongside Bani, which is spectral in the fading light of dusk. The horizon to the west glowers, concealing fire. The encircling escarpment to the north, to the east and to the south shelters Bani from the void, from the blackest shadows of the early night.

Here on this remote plain in this inconsequential village stand seven extraordinary mosques of mud-brick. Having slept fitfully since Dori, my first waking moments are alive with wonder at these strange structures, certainly among the finest in Burkina Faso, perhaps in all Africa, perhaps even all the world.

Sunset and twilight are the most beautiful times to be in Africa, the time when the late afternoon sun transforms this tired brown land into the luminous colour of gold and then soft, soft orange. Out beyond Bani, a barely perceptible mist hovers just above the scrubby plain. This time just before darkness — the moment when the day turns its final corner into dusk, the moment when the town is no longer visible — is a revelation of beauty.

Long, tortuous hours of darkness later, we pull into a village by a lake. Yalogo is a town of gas lanterns and bus headlights, silhouetted bodies and shadows rushing about in this moment of opportunity. The air is heavy with engine fumes, the happy cries of hawkers and charlatans, the choking smell of charcoal fires and frying fish, the smell of West Africa's last thickets going up in flames. Women of Yalogo scurry from bus to bus in search of spare seats, pursued by young

men sweating under monumental sacks of luggage. At a stall overflowing with bananas and mangos, the woman patronne completes my transaction with a look of studied concern and then laughs with relief when this perilous international encounter is completed without incident. She throws in an extra banana in celebration. I feel such wellbeing here on this clamorous night.

From beyond the extremities of light come a murmur of voices, dim fire-glow, and a steady stream of people, marching towards the light to celebrate the arrival of the buses spilling south from the great markets of the north. "Hey white man! Welcome to Yalogo! This is Aafrica! Hahaha!"

We rattle south, over interminable pot holes, deeper into the heart of Burkina Faso. Wide open spaces which by day stretch out from the roadside have now closed in as darkness. The road to Koala, Bourgo and Bogand peels away to the south without any sign to announce its existence; only those who live along it shall ever pass that way. Tougouri and Pissila disappear, as silent as the tall trees on their outskirts.

A few hundred metres before the Kaya turn-off, the rutted road turns suddenly to tar, like a momentary end to thirst. Animated, grateful conversation swells and then subsides as people settle down to sleep. There are still 98 kilometres to go and it has passed 9pm. But the conviction that we shall never arrive has been broken. We speed past an increasing concentration of villages — Boussouma, Korsimoro, Bissiga, Barkoundouba, Zinlar,

Loumbila and Kossodo — as we near the lights of Ouagadougou, the home of the Mossi kings.

In the barely-lit streets of a northern Ouagadougou suburb — it could be Somgand — a taxi driver offers a fair price and then tries to locate his vehicle which he has misplaced. The luggage is unloaded from under the bus. A live goat with its legs trussed together is hauled off and left without sympathy in the dust. It bleats dementedly.

We pass the Grand March, a looming monstrosity in the centre of town. This concrete eyesore replaces an earlier market, which was razed by Thomas Sankara — or "Thom Sank" as my taxi driver calls him with obvious affection — Burkina Faso's 30-something president who ruled from 1983 until 1987. Thom Sank left behind him a legacy far more appealing than his architectural achievements: he replaced government limousines with battered Peugeot's; rooted out corruption; dismissed his cabinet and sent them to work on farms; vaccinated 60 per cent of the country's children against measles, meningitis and yellow fever in one 15-day blitz; and built 350 schools in just four years. Thom Sank also gave the country hitherto known as Upper Volta a new name, Burkina Faso, which translates as the "Land of the Incorruptible" or, less prosaically, the "Country of Honest Men". In late 1987, some of these Honest Men took Thom Sank outside Ouagadougou and shot him.

In Ouagadougou's poorly lit streets, cinemas shine. People spill from the doors and line up in orderly queues despite the lateness of the hour.



Camel market on the edge of Gorom Gorom market.

PICTURES: ANTHONY HAM



A local girl selling peanuts, Ouahigouya, and right, a Fulani man on the fringe of Gorom Gorom market.



Ouagadougou, low-slung and down-at-heel, is, probably, the undisputed capital of African film. Every second year, its critically acclaimed FESPACO Film Festival draws an international cast of dignitaries. On this dark night, excited faces crowd a roadside lit by generator-powered neon signs.

At the Hotel Belle Vue, Ahmadou, the reception attendant of earnest and efficient demeanour, is excited. "The 'Miss Burkina Faso' pageant is taking place at the Cin Neerwaya. "You must go and see it, Mr Ham. These women, they are sooo pretty. You cannot imagine!" His eyes

are alive with unabashed admiration and wonder for all things beautiful. Such luminous exceptions aside, Africa's beauty rarely resides in its cities, and Ouagadougou is no exception. Beyond the small circles of light, in ramshackle streets, all is quiet.

Fast facts



Getting there

There are no direct flights from Australia to Ouagadougou, but Point-Afrique (www.point-afrique.com) flies from Paris and Marseilles a couple of times a week for \$366 (one-way, plus taxes). Air France also flies the same route. From Ouagadougou, there are daily buses to Gorom Gorom, with more frequent departures on Wednesday, the day before market day in Gorom Gorom.

Staying there

Le Pavillon Vert (ph: 0011 226 31 06 11; email pavillonvert@iptinfor.bf; Avenue de la Liberté; rooms from \$9 to \$30) A friendly, tranquil haven with straw huts, a pleasant courtyard and open-air restaurant. The more expensive rooms have air-conditioning.

Hotel Belle Vue (Ph: 30 84 98; fax 33 00 37; Avenue Nkrumah; singles/doubles from \$32/40) Simple rooms with TV, mosquito nets and air-conditioning as well as friendly staff and a central location.

Hotel les Palmiers (tel 33 33 30; fax 31 84 44; Rue Joseph Badoua; doubles/triples from \$50/75) A French-run place with stylish rooms, spacious gardens and a smallish swimming pool.

Eating

Restaurant Akwaba (Avenue Nkrumah; meals around \$8). Great African food and spectacularly kitsch decor.

La Colombe (Avenue Agostino Neto; meals from around \$4). Burkinabe specialties at outdoor tables under the African stars.

Le Coq Bleu (corner of Avenue Nkrumah and Avenue Bababangida; meals from \$7), Ouagadougou's premier restaurant for French cuisine.

FESPACO Film Festival FESPACO (www.fespaco.bf) is held every odd year in the second half of February or early March in Ouagadougou (in even years it is held in Tunis). Advance hotel booking is essential.

Local highlight The Moro Naba Ceremony: The Mossi people founded Ouagadougou in the 15th century and their emperor — the Moro Naba, the 37th in the dynasty and the most powerful traditional chief in Burkina Faso — is still consulted by the government before making any major decision. Every Friday at 7.15am at his palace, the Moro Naba parades before dignitaries at his palace, dressed first in red (the symbol for war) and astride a lavishly decorated horse, and then in white (the sign of peace). Despite the earliness of the hour, those who attend are then invited into the palace for millet beer.

Guidebook: Lonely Planet's guide to West Africa contains coverage of Burkina Faso (Anthony Ham wrote the Burkina Faso chapter, among others).

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