

We cast out from the riverbank at dawn. Behind us, Mopti, one of the largest river ports in West Africa, is uncustomarily quiet. The first wooden pirogues of the day, ferrying fishermen and other human cargo, ease their way across the Bani River, waters which will soon merge with those of the Niger. Sounds are few: the distant ratcheting of a generator, songs, murmured greetings rippling across the river, the gentle lapping of wood on water.

We drift out onto the river, which here at Mopti is sluggish and muddy brown; it carries us away from the shore, tending north in the accumulating daylight. Still within sight of Mopti, our boat gathers speed as we catch the current and the engine then springs to life, and we join the Niger bound for Timbuktu.

The journey from Mopti to Timbuktu spans the most celebrated section of the Niger, a river that is one of Africa's grand epics. At almost 2600 miles in length and Africa's third-longest river, the Niger derives its name from the Tuareg words 'gher-n-gheren', which means 'river among rivers'.

From its source as an innocuous trickle in the Fouta Djallon highlands on the Guinea-Sierra Leone border to its outlet to the sea in the blighted oil-rich lands of Nigeria's Niger Delta, the Niger carries along on its waters the history of West Africa. It was along the shores of the Niger that some of the greatest empires of African antiquity arose, among them Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Later, European explorers drawn by rumours of fabulous wealth in the African interior and by the desire to answer the great geographical questions of the age would journey along the Niger, imagining that following its course would unlock the rich and hitherto undiscovered secrets of Africa.

In the dying years of the 18th century, Mungo Park confounded the prevailing wisdom of geographers, which thought the Niger River was a distant offshoot of the Nile, and delivered the unlikely news that the Niger indeed flows east, away from the sea and into the Sahara

RIVER AMONG RIVERS

Join Sahara lover **Anthony Ham** for a trip into the desert on the waters of the enigmatic Niger River.

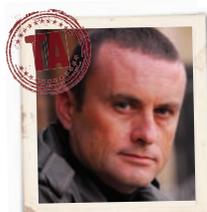
Main image: A private *pinasse* pulled up on the beach of the Niger River at Niakouliko

Below: Wooden *pirogues* serve as water taxis in the river port of Mopti, one of West Africa's busiest

Opposite, top: The Sahara and Timbuktu beckon

Opposite, middle: A mud-brick village and traditional adobe mosque by the riverbank, south of Lac Debo

Opposite, bottom: Children at play, women at work, in a Bozo village in the early stages of the journey, a few hours north of Mopti



Anthony Ham lives in Madrid, but he spends his time dreaming of the Sahara. This Niger River trip to Timbuktu was right up his alley. He has authored many Lonely Planet guidebooks, including the latest *West Africa* edition.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTHONY HAM



Niger River

Source: Fouta Djallon highlands in the border region of Guinea and Sierra Leone

Mouth: Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria

Countries drained: Guinea, Sierra Leone, Algeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Mali, Niger, Benin and Nigeria

Length: 4180km

Main tributary: Benue River

Did you know? The Niger loses almost 70 per cent of its potential flow in Mali (between Ségou and Timbuktu) due to evaporation and seepage.

Niger River

SOUNDS ARE FEW: THE DISTANT RACHETING OF A GENERATOR, SONGS AND MURMURED GREETINGS RIPPLING ACROSS THE RIVER, THE GENTLE LAPPING OF WOOD ON WATER



Desert. It would be more than a century after Mungo Park's death on the river in 1806 before geographers would finally solve the mystery of the Niger's unusual route: an ancient river, the Djoliba, petered out into the sands north of Timbuktu, deep in the Sahara, while a second river, the Quorra, descended from the Ahaggar Mountains of southern Algeria to the Gulf of Guinea. When the Sahara was transformed into a desert around 7000 years ago the two rivers became one, linked by what is now known as the Niger Bend or Boucle du Niger.

While the Niger River was one of the unsolved enigmas of 18th-century Africa, the river's future has become one of the most pressing concerns for what is today the world's poorest region. The Niger's unusually low gradient and the highly variable rainfall along its course have made it extremely vulnerable to drought: its high and low watermarks can vary by an extraordinary 10.7 metres. In 1972 and 1984 the river almost dried up completely, and was reduced to stagnant pools in some areas. Even in good years, the river is navigable only from August to November or December. With 110 million people living in the Niger basin and to varying degrees dependent upon the river for their survival, it is difficult to overstate the implications of the Niger's uncertain future: drought, climate change, population growth and pollution have all adversely affected the river's health, and



its volume has fallen by a staggering 55 per cent since the 1980s. The World Bank has even warned that it could one day dry up completely.

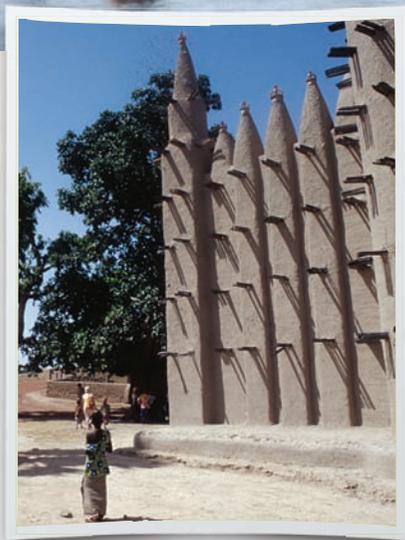
The dependence of riverine cultures upon the Niger is everywhere evident on the journey north from Mopti. All along the riverbank, atop islands that barely rise above the water's edge, are the seasonal villages of the Bozo people, the fishing nomads of the Niger River, whose straw huts crouch on the shoreline. The Bozo, who have never been to war, believe they live in mystical union with the river and have the ability to quiet the river's angry spirits or to summon up a living from its depths even in the hardest of

times. Known universally in Mali as 'Gui-tigui' (the 'Masters of the River'), the Bozo are a true river people whose villages can seem like an extension of the river itself – their narrow byways are often half-submerged and lined with racks of drying fish.

Further north, exquisite and perfectly proportioned mud-brick mosques of startling intensity line the riverbank. In their symmetry and sophistication, the mosques create an effect somewhere between sandcastles arising from a child's imagination and some giant river fossil.

We leave behind the wide river for one of the Niger's countless narrow channels lined with reeds, and for a time travel along an altogether more intimate waterway than the mighty Niger of history. Soon there are no villages. ▷





**IN THEIR SYMMETRY AND SOPHISTICATION,
THE MOSQUES CREATE AN EFFECT SOMEWHERE
BETWEEN SANDCASTLES ARISING FROM A CHILD'S
IMAGINATION AND SOME GIANT RIVER FOSSIL**

▷ Fellow travellers, too, are fewer here: a pirogue glides past with scarcely a sound; a wooden sailboat with a sail sewn from rice sacks eases upriver. On the empty water's edge, a cobra, black as black, suns itself on the shore, water lapping at its tail.

Top: One of the largest mud-brick mosques in Mali's Niger Delta, on the first day's journey north of Mopti

Above: An elaborate mud-brick mosque, typical of those found in riverbank villages throughout the Niger Delta

Right: Local children watching the boats come and go at Korioumé, Timbuktu's Niger River port

Opposite: Sunset on the Niger River, north of Mopti

The channels then empty into Lac Debo, the almost horizonless lake at the heart of the vast, inland Niger Delta, which at 30,000 square kilometres is twice the size of the Okavango Delta. We camp on the lake's northern shore, at the foot of low sand hills. Small waves touch the beach throughout the night, barely breaking the silence.

On the second morning, it becomes clear that the Niger River does so much more than serve as the lifeblood for the peoples of West Africa – it also crosses one of the great symbolic frontiers of the continent. As we leave Lac Debo and continue north, the villages of the sub-Saharan Bozo yield to those of the Fulani and the Songhai, two cultures powerful and ancient who range across the southern fringes of the Sahara. The Fulani in particular enliven monochromatic mud villages with men in distinctive conical straw hats, women in riotous colours and gold and amber jewellery, and a forest of curved horns from the cattle that stand at the centre of Fulani culture.





At the predominantly Songhai settlement of Niafunké, the largest of the riverbank towns between Mopti and Timbuktu, and the one-time home of master blues guitarist Ali Farka Touré, broad, sandy streets fan out from the riverbank only to peter out in the semi-desert of the outskirts.

All throughout our second day on the river, the lush greenery of the south is replaced by the sandy expanses of the north; villages become rare, the elaborate mosques are replaced by the temporary settlements of desert nomads who draw near to the river, and camels are as common as fishing boats.

We camp on a deserted shoreline and watch in silence as the river's surface is transformed into luxuriant, mauve velvet. To the east, a sailing ship rounds the low headland, *Beau Geste*-like, a silent apparition that floats past with no signs of life, spectral in the gloom, making for the setting sun.

By morning, the transition is complete: the clamour of the south has been replaced by the spare, sandy riverbank of the north. Tuareg encampments are the only signs of human settlements; unlike the Bozo villages where children gambol out into the shallows and women caterwaul in greeting, the Tuareg villages often seem empty. Perhaps some are, but more often their silence reflects the reserve of a people famously wary of intruders into their realm; shy women and children peer out of darkened doorways, offering little more than fleeting glimpses of shadows.

Near journey's end, the river which for centuries confounded those who would know its secrets plays one last trick: the Niger no longer laps at Timbuktu's outskirts as it once did – the port of Korioumé lies 18km from the city itself. It is one final twist in the river's story, allowing that most reclusive of historical cities to guard its secrets for just a little while longer. 🐾

Plan your trip

Getting there

Royal Air Maroc (www.royalairmaroc.com) flies to Bamako via Casablanca. Private bus companies and domestic airlines operate between Bamako and Mopti. Comanav public ferries connect Mopti and Korioumé; a private pinasse from Mopti to Timbuktu that seats ten people will cost at least CFA400,000 (£540), plus CFA15,000 (£20) per person and can be arranged through tour operators.

When to visit

The only time when the Niger is certainly navigable is from August to November, with river journeys sometimes possible until January. October to December promise the mildest temperatures, with minimal rains.

Visas

Five-day visas (CFA15,000; £20) are available on arrival and can be renewed for one month once inside Mali. The nearest Malian Consulate-General for UK travellers is in Paris.

Books

Lonely Planet's *West Africa* (7th edition, 2009) and Bradt's *Mali* (3rd edition, 2009) are excellent companions for your Mali visit. *The Strong Brown God*, by Sanche de Gramont, is an engaging history of the Niger River and its peoples, while Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* is a classic of African travel.

Find out more

Toguna Adventure Tours (www.togunaadventuretours.com)

