

INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Experience dramatic scenery and the local way of life on an adventurous trek into Mali's Dogon country

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Dogon country

MALI

As I glance to my left, the large African sun is disappearing quickly, transforming the sky from a burning red into a pinky haze as deep purple clouds close in. To my right a storm rages, forked lightning stabbing the already rain-drenched savannah in an electrifying display. With these contrasting scenes on either side it's as though nature is competing for my attention. Mali is creating a dramatic first impression and I can't wait to get into the thick of it.

I'm on my way to start a trek into Dogon country – four days of hiking deep into the wilderness, to stay with the Dogon people.

That night after the sun disappears, the lightning continues, illuminating the sky and casting eerie silhouettes across the land. We shelter in a run-down old hostel, and by the time we wake, the sun is back in its rightful place, drying out the flooded landscape.

UP AND OVER THE ESCARPMENT

Leaving early, we drive a few kilometres to the small village of Dourou where the trek starts. We pack day bags of essentials – water bottles, wet wipes, toothbrushes, towels, underwear and a change of clothes – then at 4pm we set off, hiking 7km to Nombori village.

Our local guide Malik has given each of the girls in our group a traditional name to fit

“The spectacular panorama makes it worth the effort”

their personality. Mine is Djenba, which means ‘happy one’. “We’ll see,” I think as we start the ascent up the 500m escarpment.

Luckily the climb is gradual, and the spectacular panorama at the top makes it more than worth the effort. I sit on the precarious lookout post – a small sliver of cliff with just enough room to stand – and take in the remarkable landscape around me. To my left the escarpment dominates the skyline and to my right are rolling sand dunes, while in front of me the rainy season has left mile upon mile of green farmland, interrupted only by narrow flowing streams.

There's not much time to linger, though, as time is against us. The descent is trickier and we need to reach the plains and arrive in the village before sunset.

GREETING THE TRIBE

We make it to Nombori just as night is falling to find a village typical of the Dogon region, with

NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO November to January is thought of as the most pleasant time to visit. At present the Foreign Office advises against all travel to the provinces of Mali north of the River Niger from Mopti.

GETTING THERE Mali's main airport is Bamako's S nou International Airport. Air France (airfrance.co.uk) flies to Bamako via Paris.

GETTING AROUND A tour is a convenient way to travel around Mali. Dragoman (dragoman.com) offers a 25-day Best of Ghana and Mali trip starting at  233. Otherwise use private buses for travel south of the River Niger, or take boat trips on the river itself.

VISAS Everyone needs a visa. It's possible to get one on entry into Mali for about  20. Bring two passport photos with you.

CURRENCY West African CFA Franc. 1 GBP = 700.35 CFA. It's not advisable to use credit/debit cards – bring travellers cheques in euros instead.

LANGUAGE French and Bambara.

ACCOMMODATION A dorm bed will set you back about 3000-5000 CFA. Air-conditioned rooms are in short supply, but expect to pay 8000 CFA plus.

SEE ambamali-jp.org/en.



The Dogon area's escarpment

small single-storey mud houses nestling into the cliffside. The villagers come out to greet us and, as is polite in their culture, ask everyone a series of questions. The greeting might be time consuming, but it's rhythmical and nice to listen to.

After a dinner of couscous and tomato sauce I retire to a small stone room – it's raining slightly so there's no rooftop camping tonight – to get some rest before our early start the next morning.

The sun beams in at 5.30am, and after a short tour of the village we're off again. We're covering 16km on the first day, stopping only for lunch and to witness the famous Dogon mask dance in the village of Tirelli.

By about 8am the temperature has already soared above 30 C. The sheer heat makes walking very tough, and sooner or later we all slip into our own worlds. At a brief rest stop I sink to the floor, defeated, and look up to find a fellow trekker leaning against a baobab tree,

“The dancers are dressed in brightly coloured masks”

his face pressed up against the trunk enjoying this precious moment of shade. We're all feeling the effects.

THE DOGON MASK DANCE

We arrive in Tirelli to a long table filled with cold bottled water. The traditional mask dance is performed to passing tourists as well as an audience of village elders who, to my surprise, continuously heckle the male dancers. We watch a cast of 30, dressed in brightly coloured masks and costumes made out of the wood stripped from baobab trees.

After a short rest we're back on the road and off to Ireli, where we will stay the night. It's

DOGON CULTURE

VILLAGE LIFE

The Dogon people can be traced back to the 14th century and are a mix of Muslim, Christian and animist. Village life is male dominated, with animist men allowed up to 10 wives. All villages contain a toguna – a small stone temple in which the men discuss village goings on. The toguna is only a few metres high, so in a heated debate if anyone wants to storm out they have to crawl, which isn't quite so effective.

AND DEATH

The villages' graveyards and funerals are for men only. Funerals are a time of celebration in the Dogon culture, and it's feared that women would be too emotional at them. Women can visit their loved ones only after three months have passed, but not during menstruation.

CUSTOMS

The Dogon believe men and woman are born with both sexual components. The clitoris is male and the prepuce is female. Circumcision is performed on both sexes, so men and women can assume their proper gender.

ON LOCATION

Dogon villages are carved into the side of the escarpment, where centuries before the Tellem lived. The Dogon believe the Tellems were 'mystical flying pygmies', due to their homes being built high into the hills.

MASK DANCE

The dance is performed in an array of colours. This has been modified from traditional colours used to represent humans – black for skin, white for bone and red for blood. The dance is performed by men ranging in age from 15 to 50 years old. Characters are determined by the dancers' ancestors.

Simon Westcott / Robert Harding / Rex Features, Getty Images, Jenny Patel/Robert Harding



been two days since we left relative civilisation. I'm tired, uncomfortable and desperately wanting a shower.

That night I climb up to the roof of a village mud house and into my mosquito net-covered mattress. I lie down and stare into the night sky. With the Milky Way's hazy band of white lights twinkling in front of me, I feel like I can see right through to the centre of the universe.

I wake in a much better frame of mind, ready to ignore the pain from my blistered feet. We traipse through crocodile-infested waters, get eaten alive by flies, and eventually climb back up the 500m escarpment in the midday sun to reach the village of Sanga.

I collapse on top of the escarpment and look over the Dogon country, feeling an enormous sense of achievement. Mali has more than lived up to the drama of its first impression.

NEXT WEEK: WINTER BREAKS
Where to find fun in the snow

PCL Foubert / Rex Features, Getty Images



Pirogues on the Niger River

HIGHLIGHTS OF MALI

DJENNE

Be sure to visit the Unesco World Heritage Site of Djenne, which is built entirely of mud. The bustling market lies at the foot of Africa's largest mud building – The Grand Mosque.

NIGER RIVER

Cruise along the majestic river on a pirogue, hovering just inches above the water. If you're lucky you'll see herds of grazing hippos. The sun setting over the river casts beautiful silhouettes of the Bozo tribe fishing.

SEGOU

This town is refreshingly different to all other towns in Mali. Wander down its wide, tree-lined streets marvelling at the old colonial buildings. The shores of the River Niger offer an ample supply of photo opportunities.



Mud houses built into the cliff

TNT online

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weather AVERAGES FOR BAMAKO

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
HOURS OF DAYLIGHT	12	12	12	12	13	13	13	13	12	12	12	11
MAX	33	36	38	39	38	35	32	31	32	35	33	33
MIN	17	20	23	25	26	24	22	22	22	22	19	17
AVERAGE RAINFALL (mm)	1	0	3	19	55	125	219	276	179	60	3	1

KEY: Hours of daylight Average rainfall (mm) *Statistics based on monthly averages
Weather information provided by weather2travel.com



Traditional Dogon dancer