

Gladstone Memorial Trust Travel Award Report

Mali, Senegal & The Gambia – following Mungo Park

It is hard to condense such a vivid and full experience into a few pages of A4 – but I will try. I hope it conveys what an adventure it was, and how grateful I am for the support of the Gladstone Memorial Trust.

We – myself and Christina - just about arrived in one piece in Bamako, capital of Mali. That first drive into Bamako was unforgettable. We crossed the Niger at dawn – the sun rising through the heavy grey air like a pale disc of manna. The Niger looked blue, which I wasn't expecting - it is nicknamed the Strong Brown God, after all.

Bamako, in Mungo Park's day, was a small dusty fishing village of a population of about 6,000. Now it is a sprawling low-rise city with a kind of raffish charm, a low-key manageable warmth. Bamako was a time to get bearings, initiate ourselves into the food (spicy fish and rice being the staple), wait for our delayed luggage and wander around practicing our French. We also went to Mali's national museum, which was excellent, not least for its replica models of famous mosques currently being used as kennels for yappy puppies.

Once the bags arrived (with great relief and with a lot of fuss getting them), it was up-country on our first Malian bus ride, an infuriating mixture of abject chaos and utter pedantry. Chaos, in the mad fight to get people, luggage and goats on board; pedantry in buying the right tickets, and then waiting at innumerable police checkpoints on the road north. The goal was Djenne, requiring crossing the River Bani at about midnight. This involved waiting for 20 minutes under a dizzying star-lit sky, listening to a river-full of toads, and then wading a few metres to reach the ferry: a scene etched onto our memories, I think.

After scant sleep, we awoke for Djenne's Monday Market, held in front of its colossal mud-brick mosque. This mosque, a 1907 replica of an identical mosque built in the 13th century, is the largest mud-built building in the world, a sort of 4-storey 100m-wide vertical sandcastle. It was astonishing. Mungo only reached Djenne on his second, fatal, trip; so even though there is no written record of it, I got a strange kick seeing what he saw, unchanged in 200 years. The market – which was far too busy getting on with buying and selling to mind a few travellers – was a riotous counterpoint to the mosque's muddy elegance.

We left Djenne that afternoon for Mopti, aware that as a very small town in the middle of nowhere, it would be impossible to leave for another week. The shared transport was just about the bare minimum needed to qualify as a "car". Its windows were raised by reaching into the holes in the doors and pushing the glass up. Opening the door was only possible by pulling three bits of wire at the same time. With holes in the floor, the thing was rusty from bonnet to boot. This was a *sept-place*, our standard method of transport across West Africa: an old Renault, Peugeot or Citroen, designed for 6 people, with 7 people in it, run as shared transport for long distances. There was also the *neuf-place*: the same car, with another two people squeezed in. Animals and children do not count as people for the purposes of filling a *sept-place*.

Still, we arrived in Mopti safely with only one long police stop. Mopti was a frontier town that felt like it existed to serve people and vehicles going somewhere else. Again, no written record from Mungo, but he would have passed here. By this point, he had taken the fatal decision to cease contact with peoples on the shore until he got to the delta. Ultimately, the resulting failure

to respect local rulers resulted in his own death, and possibly ill-feeling that hindered following expeditions. Not ours though - we were trying to make as much contact with Malians as possible, which didn't prove that hard. But we too were to move on, to what was a real highlight of the trip: the Dogon Country.

We spent three days trekking here, along the Falaise de Bandiagara, a 100m-high cliff that runs 150km across Eastern Mali. It is as though an almighty floorboard, laid across the floor of Africa, has sprung up at one end, bringing one sweeping plain to a close with an abyss-like drop to another. We spent 3 days here: sleeping under the stars, 60km from the nearest lightbulb, was incredible. Dogon culture and cosmology appeared a mystifying unique world that I shouldn't pretend to understand; but our guide, Hamidou, was excellent at trying to make us decipher the masks we saw, the traditions we witnessed, and the landscapes we walked through. I was expecting to come away from either frustrated by the crude impact of tourism on a fragile culture, or frustrated by tourists who would expect the preservation of that culture to the total exclusion of any form of positive change: but I was pleasantly surprised neither was realised.

Back in Mopti, we had a trip onto the river by pirogue, a very elegant type of wooden boat, to the confluence of muddy Bani and blue Niger. The river was Mungo's goal and highway, but was our relaxation. The journey back down Mali was similar to the way up, except this time our lodgings in Bamako was a Nun-run mission. There is nothing quite so cheering at the end of a long day travelling as being shepherded into a serene compound by a little old French nun.

And then, the train. This was West Africa's premier line, linking the capitals of Senegal and Mali. We'd decided that getting the train all the way to Dakar was a little ambitious, mainly because the railway staff didn't know which day of the week it was leaving. So instead, we bought our tickets on an internal train to Kayes, in the far west of Mali. The train was supposed to take 7 to 10 hours, a pretty big margin of error to start off with. It took 22. There's no real way to describe it, other than some kind of sweaty endurance test. I'm still glad we took it, just to experience it, but it wasn't pleasant. Only Malian railways (probably) have speed limits for the trains set at 10, 20 and 30km/h.

I've never seen a goat overtake a train before. I have also never stopped at a lone hut on a train before. And I would never take that train again.

But I would never have done this trip without trying it.

We just about got to Kayes. I was sick, for the only time in an otherwise perfectly healthy trip, through sheer exhaustion. Kayes was grubby, and the next few days were a bit of an ebb, in the same area as Mungo's low point, where he ended up imprisoned, then wandering with nothing but a horse and a compass. After the sights of Mali, we had long, tiring days, tramping across the dusty border regions. We didn't even have a horse. Our first Senegalese town was unremarkable Tambacounda, then west again, to Kaolack, then to Toubacouta, on the Atlantic coast.

This was a very picturesque little place, surrounded by mangrove swamps and creeks and lots of birdlife. Quite a relief, and made quite special by an invitation to lunch from a lovely Senegalese couple. We ate *tieboudienne*, the spicy fish and rice dish, which was never a bad thing, then spent a few hours drinking mint tea. As always on the trip, tea was in 3 rounds: one bitterly strong (symbolising death), one less strong (life) and then one sweet (love).

At this point, we realised our clock was 2 hours slow. We don't know how long we had been behind for, but it raises the possibility we were 2 hours late for everything, and didn't notice for a fortnight. This says a lot.

Arriving in The Gambia was bedlam. An official asked us into his office for "a little chat" - a bizarre, horrible and not particularly subtle attempt to catch us out on something - anything - and respond with a demand for a bribe. He failed, but not before we had revealed every aspect of our lives. I've never been interrogated by police before, and I can't say it was much fun.

Bewildered and relieved, on our bush taxi to Banjul, the capital, we had the pleasure of sitting beside an interesting old lady. She kept pointing at Christina, herself, and the lady sitting next to her and crying "You have 3 wife! Number one, two and three! I am your second wife!" She yelled this at everyone on the bus; she told it to every surly policeman who asked to see our passports; but mostly, she burped it to me, in my ear. On arrival for the ferry to Banjul, she argued over our fare for us, took us to a moneychanger, took her cut for helping us (10p), took us to the ferry, saw us get our tickets, told me she loved me, and disappeared.

We only really stayed in the touristy part (that was the point), which meant excellent infrastructure, lots of activities and restaurants, and English speakers. I'm sure there is another Gambia up-country which is much more like what we'd seen so far, but we still had an excellent time. We saw forest parks and mangrove swamps and drank Horlicks. We also went to a Sacred Crocodile Pool (both pool and crocodiles are sacred), patted Charley the crocodile (at the behest of his keeper) and then felt slightly nauseous at what we'd just done.

The only Gambian sight I feel we missed was the Mungo Park memorial, unfortunately too remote to get to in rainy season. I did, however, make up for it by chancing upon the grave of Mungo's nephew (also called Mungo Park) in rural Perthshire in August.

We crossed back into Senegal, past Toubacouta, past Kaolack, to Mbour. Apart from unsubtle and unsuccessful pickpocketing attempts here, we again spent a few days getting dangerously close to wildlife (rhinos this time), visiting interesting villages and enjoying Senegalese hospitality. We then went to Saint Louis, the old capital of French West Africa, right up near the Mauritanian border, for a few days. It consisted mostly of crumbling French architecture, patisseries, tourist shops, and fishing, and with a pleasant youth hostel was an excellent place to potter.

Dakar was our final stop, with the first visit being to the Ile de Goree. This was a small island, whose main focus was the *maison d'esclaves*, a house that held slaves before transportation to America. This was the only contact with the history of the slave trade we had on the trip, and it was an odd one. I found the contrast between the elegant lines of the pink house, and the horrors it must have contained, quite powerful. But its quiet soberness was spoiled - ruined - by hordes of loud snap-happy tourists. I thought it slightly off to have a photo taken, gurning in front of the child slaves' room: hardly "wish you were here" material.

Mungo was distinctly ambivalent on the slave trade. He joined a slave group on his way back to the River Gambia, and he returned from his first trip as the surgeon on a slave ship, stopping for some weeks in Goree, before passage to Antigua and Britain. He witnessed first-hand the harsh reality of slave life. But he also seems to extrapolate what he saw as the deep roots of slavery in West and North African societies into a sort of dispassionate non-objection to the Atlantic slave trade - perhaps incongruously for an empathetic man, seeing the trade first-hand, at a time when the abolition movement was at its peak.

If Goree was quiet contemplation spoiled, Dakar was quiet contemplation smashed up, danced upon and forced into a loudspeaker. Dakar is a big, big city. It was quite daunting. We saw its limited sights and experienced its mass of eateries and urban buzz. Though we luckily avoided petty theft, we faced hassle on a scale not experienced elsewhere, even getting told to move on from outside the Presidential Palace for “loitering”.

It was a suitably intense end to a stimulating trip. We both had an immensely rewarding time, and I cannot emphasise enough how grateful I am for the help of the Gladstone Memorial Trust. Without the grant, I simply could not have gone.

I must admit I don't know entirely where this leaves me with Mungo. I appreciate even more his stamina and intelligence, but also his serious errors of judgement. Reading his journal makes me conscious that my own prejudices or ignorance will, no doubt, be apparent from this report - however small it is compared to his account, and however personally eye-opening my trip. Perhaps that is the fate of *any* tale from such a captivating part of the world: an area that enmeshes you whole, turns you around in a dizzying series of experiences and then sets you down, disorientated, amazed and unsure quite how to process what just happened. The confusion, clamour and joy of West Africa is so intense, putting it to paper not only belies its very vitality but also exposes my incapacity to do so without myself, rather than West Africa itself, being the real influence.

What I do know, is that like Mungo I also chafed at the ordered quietness of lowland Scotland after West Africa. So I think that a few months later, I have the same feeling Mungo must have felt – that wanderlust that led to his second expedition.