

STILL HERE

By Joshua Hammer

It was another unbearably hot afternoon in Timbuktu, and at the Thierry Sabine Bar on the town's main street, proprietor Oumer Zexe was beginning to feel the strain. He placed the establishment's single cassette—*Bob Marley Live*—into the boom box, wiped sand off a few more cocktail glasses and stared forlornly at the meager wares displayed on a rack behind the counter. The Thierry Sabine Bar (named after the organizer of the Paris-Dakar auto rally, which passes through Timbuktu every February) boasted four bottles of Johnny Walker Black Label and two bottles of Campari. All of them were empty. "Everybody is waiting for the boat," Zexe said. "When the boats start running, we'll have full bottles again."

Perched at the edge of the Sahara desert, eight miles above the northernmost bend of the Niger River, the fabled city of Timbuktu has for centuries been synonymous with the end of the earth. But the town's remoteness has never seemed as suffocating as now. Since 1991, Timbuktu has been terrorized by a rebellion of Tuareg nomads seeking independence from Mali and threatening the country's nascent democracy. Sweeping out of the Sahara on camels and four-wheel-drive Toyotas, the Tuaregs stopped road traffic dead, cut off supplies and wiped out the tourist trade. Tensions between Tuaregs and blacks grew, and black vigilantes, supplied with weapons by the Malian military, burned down Tuareg encampments in retaliation for rebel raids. At least 30,000 people fled to Mauritania, and Timbuktu's isolation deepened.

In May, at least, there was some good news: the government signed a truce with the rebels, promising economic development and integration of the armed forces. But three months of peace don't seem to have stopped the rot. You can see what the problems are. At the onset of the rainy season in July, when I visited the place, torrential downpours wiped out the two sand tracks that link Timbuktu to the nearest tarmac highway, 100 miles to the south. The big boats that transport passengers and cargo down the Niger River to Timbuktu don't begin operating until August, leaving the town virtually cut off from the outside world. (The only ways in or out are sporadic flights on Air Mali, nicknamed Air Maybe, and dugout canoes that ply the Niger shallows.) There are no newspapers, one radio station and two

phone lines; in those dismal weeks before the first boat arrived, merchants spent much of their time gossiping in their mud-walled huts, counting supplies and waiting for the Niger to rise. Droughts and shifting sands have caused that event to come later and later. "Ten years ago the first boat arrived on July 1. Five years ago it was July 15," said Moulaye Haidara, a Timbuktu politician. "Now if we're lucky it's here by early August. In another five years, who knows?" Unless a paved road is built to Timbuktu, Haidara warned, "we will be lost forever."

Timbuktu has been losing its vitality steadily for the past 500 years. It hit its peak during the fifteenth century, when its position on the Niger River made it a bustling commercial crossroads for Saharan salt caravans and ivory, gold and slave traders from black Africa. The Kingdom of Mali's Islamic rulers built 180 Koranic schools and black Africa's greatest Islamic university here; the population swelled to 100,000 by 1450, including 25,000 Muslim scholars from as far away as Cairo. Descriptions of Timbuktu as a West African El Dorado led forty-three European explorers to try to reach the town across the Sahara desert between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; all but four died in the crossing, either from thirst or at the hands of Tuareg warriors. Today plaques along the town's alleys identify the residences of such adventurers as the British Gordon Laing, who arrived in 1826 disguised as an Arab trader, only to

be exposed and beheaded a few weeks later. A block away is the former abode of the Frenchman Rene Caillie, who came in 1828 and escaped to tell about it. By then the salt caravans had all but disappeared, replaced by European merchant fleets that sailed along the West coast of Africa, and Timbuktu had fallen into terminal decline. The city, Caillie wrote, consisted of "a jumble of badly built houses ruled over by a heavy silence."

It still is. Donkeys bray and black-veiled women wander outside Sankore Mosque, once black Africa's greatest center of Islamic learning, now a collapsing mud pyramid on a desolate street. At the Hotel Bouctou, one of Timbuktu's two tourist establishments, manager Boubacar Toure sipped tea in a sand-filled lobby decorated with decade-old Mali tourist posters. The next Air Mali flight from Bamako was three days away, and Toure hoped it would bring business. "We had no Westerners this week, and none the week before, but maybe we'll get lucky," he said. Of his twenty-nine rooms, only four were occupied, all by Malian traders. Beyond the hotel, sand blew across a landscape of dunes, scrawny acacia trees, hobbled camels and the domed cardboard-and-plastic huts of Tuareg refugees. Soulemane Al Galime, a Tuareg government clerk, sat sipping tea in a plastic chair and watched the scene. The place had its shortcomings, he admitted, but he had long ago surrendered to the inertia that seems to consume nearly everybody in Timbuktu. "I was born here, I grew up here, I have never left here," he said, shrugging. "I will probably die here, too."

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