The Other Side of Africa, with Children

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When you think of a vacation to Africa, you think of East Africa, with safaris through lion and elephant country. My wife Laurel and I had seen all that in our youth, when for our honeymoon we drove a Land Rover from London to Capetown. Now we have a family, two boys, William 14 and Thomas 10. We were yearning for adventure again last spring – or at least I was – and we thought the boys were just about old enough to be able to handle something like that. We decided to go to West Africa, which we had never seen.

West Africa is quite different from East Africa. There are no large game parks teeming with antelope and zebras; we saw a few hartebeests in Maraoue National Park in Ivory Coast, but that was all. There are no snow-capped volcanoes rising from the plains, none of those magnificent vistas that made "Out of Africa" so beautiful. There is a lot of variety, as the terrain ranges from the Sahara desert in the north, through the brownish green savanna, to the thick, lush rain forests and the long, deserted, sandy beaches bordering the ocean in the south. But the land is mostly flat, nothing spectacular.

It is culture and history that West Africa has to offer. Mali, where we spent two weeks, is landlocked right in the center of West Africa, just south of the Sahara. It was the center of the great medieval African empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Its cities — Timbuktu, Djenné, and Gao — have histories reaching back over a thousand years, when they were the southern termini of the trans-Saharan camel caravans, shipping gold and slaves to the north and receiving guns and salt in return. Islam had become the dominant religion by the fourteenth century, and as a result mud adobe mosques with squat rounded minarets and reinforcing logs protruding from the walls came to dominate the architecture of the cities and villages. Mali became a French colony in the 1890s, but as in all of West Africa, Europeans did not find the climate congenial, and there was very little settlement.

There is still very little Western influence, and much of the modernization that was introduced no longer works. There was no long-distance telephone system while we were there; they were getting it replaced, and had taken out the old one, but hadn't yet installed the new. All communication between cities was by short-wave radio. There was little traffic on the roads. In going from the capital Bamako, a city of more than 600,000 to the second largest city Mopti, population 60,000, about 400 miles away, we saw no more than ten other vehicles on the road. Mail went out of Mopti on a weekly postal bus. Electricity at the hotel in Timbuktu only worked from seven to midnight in the evenings, and in the other cities we could never be certain the air conditioners in our hotel would be working when we retreated to them in the hot afternoons. We never had hot water. The streets of Mopti were bordered by open sewers.

All of this inconvenient lack of modernization meant, however, that the old culture of Mali was all the more evident. Men still dressed in robes, for the most part. There were usually a few modern two or three story buildings, but the cities mainly consist of mazes of the original mud adobe houses. The colorful and pungent outdoor marketplaces thrived on foods we didn't recognize. Often I had the sensation I was visiting a great civilization of the past, the Roman Empire perhaps or medieval Europe — or the great medieval empires of West Africa.

A consequence of all this, and another big difference for the tourist between the two sides of Africa, is that there are very few modern amenities. West Africa is just not geared up for the tourist trade. While the pictures we returned with showed the ancient mud adobe mosques and the riots of color in the marketplace and along the banks of the Niger River, all our stories concerned the difficulties of just getting about.

To travel from city to city in West Africa, you go by taxi. It's not expensive; $20 can get you 400 miles. You go to a taxi park at the edge of town, where there is an official sitting at a table. You tell him where you want to go, and he puts your name on a list. The taxis are Puegeot 504 station wagons. They put two passengers in the one seat next to the driver, four passengers in the three seats in the middle, and three passengers in the two seats in the rear. That makes nine people besides the driver. When they get nine people to sign up for a particular town, they send a taxi. You might wait fifteen minutes for one to leave, or you might wait two days. Being "rich" Americans on a short vacation, who already filled half the taxi, we would buy the remaining seats just to get it going. Sometimes there were three other people with us. Sometimes we were all alone. We always had a little more room to spread out.

There are two classes of hotels in Mali. Which class we stayed in depended on the kind of day we had had. The first class hotels are impressive architecturally from the outside, but the rooms are more Motel Six quality. They cost $50 a night for a double, or $100 a night for our whole family. The second class hotels had doubles for $6. They were in mud adobe buildings. Sometimes they had air conditioners, but never with any pretense of working. Sometimes the toilets would flush; other times they were just holes in the floor. The windows were covered with sheets of corrugated metal you could prop open with a stick, if you wanted air. The beds were flimsy wooden affairs; one collapsed on me twice during the night. They had pitted sponge rubber mattresses. We never used the bedding, not wanting to disturb any insect life; we had brought our own sleeping sheets. Tall sticks were nailed to the four corners of each bed and a mosquito net was draped over it. The floors and walls were covered at night with a profusion of insects; I always emptied my shoes before I put them on in the morning. At one of these hotels, a frog hopped in the room just ahead of me as I went in for the night. I figured we occupied different ecological niches, so I let him be.

We were introduced early to the rigors of travelling in Mali. Our first night out of Bamako found us in San, a town of 20,000. It had only a second class hotel with four rooms, and they were all taken. Our taxi driver was concerned, so he took William and me around to look for something else. My French is barely functional. I could handle ordinary situations, but this was one that was beyond me. All we could do was follow the driver and trust he was doing the right thing. First we went to an official looking building that we thought was a hospital because it had an ambulance out front. Apparently that didn't work out for next he led us to a mud hut that appeared to be a bar, and perhaps a brothel. We both steeled ourselves for a hard night. Next we went to a smaller hut, then accosted some teenagers on a street corner, and finally went inside the courtyard and up to the roof of a larger house, where an old man had us sit down and offered us tea. It turned out the "hospital" was really the city hall, we needed the mayor's permission to stay there, all the places we had gone since then were to look for the mayor, and that's who this old man was. Our rooms in the city hall were only a cut below the second class hotels.

We were very conservative when it came to food. We only had twenty-two days in West Africa and didn't want to spend any of those days sick. We always ate dinner at the first class hotels — spaghetti Bolognese or steak and french fries — generally for about $45 for the four of us.

We were also very careful about the water. I had brought several bottles of iodine tablets to purify the water, but the taste was terrible, and seemed to get worse every day. Eventually, we went over almost entirely to a mineral water bottled in Ivory Coast, called "Awa". A liter of Awa could cost anywhere from 75 cents to $3, depending on whether it had been refrigerated. One day we spent $29 on Awa.

We were almost the only middle class, middle-aged tourists we saw, and certainly the only ones with children. We met Peace Corps Volunteers who had just finished their tour of duty in Sierra Leone or Gabon and were travelling around the rest of West Africa by taxi or Land Rover before going home. We met French people in their twenties travelling around on the cheap. We met a French art scholar who was about to hike through the tribal Dogon country to visit certain blacksmiths. There were some Baptist missionaries and some US and UN aid officials. But there was no one else like us.

We knew the hardest part of the trip was going to be getting to Timbuktu. Timbuktu probably isn't a nice place to live, and might not even be a nice place to visit, but it's certainly a nice place to be able to say you've been to, just because of what the name symbolizes.

Before leaving the California for West Africa, I tried to reserve a flight on Air Mali to Timbuktu, but my travel agent only received cryptic replies. My reservation couldn't be confirmed, but my place on a waiting list wasn't disconfirmed. In Bamako I learned the reason. Air Mali was out of business. There were no flights to Timbuktu.

The only option seemed to be to go to Mopti, just 200 miles southwest of Timbuktu. There is a steamer that sails from Mopti down the Niger River to Timbuktu during the rainy season, taking two days to get there. But the rainy season had just started, and the river wasn't high enough yet. It finally did begin its first run our second week in Mali, but broke down 50 miles outside Bamako, and never got to Mopti, let alone Timbuktu.

The Michelin map shows an "unmarked track" for four-wheel drive vehicles from Mopti to Timbuktu, but the rainy season was too advanced for that. Large portions were under water.

As soon as we got to Mopti, we were accosted by men in the street who offered to arrange a "pirogue", a long narrow canoe, to take us down the river to Timbuktu. They told us it would take three or four days. We learned later from more reliable sources, however, that it was more like ten to twelve days.

Then our second morning in Mopti, as we walked the half mile into town from the lovely, first-class Hotel Kanaga overlooking the river, a man named Amadou Mariko caught up with us. He worked for SMERT, the national tourist agency of Mali. He was bright, informative, and helpful, and, best of all, spoke beautiful English. He told us there was a cargo plane from Mopti to Timbuktu several times a week, and maybe we could get a ride on that.

That evening he took William and me out to the airport, half an hour from town, to find out about the plane. We talked to the commandant of the airport as he lay on a mattress outside his house, complaining of a headache and asking me for aspirin. He said there would be a cargo plane the next morning.

The next morning all of us returned to the airport, but there was to be no plane. The plane's regular run was from Bamako to Mopti to Timbuktu, and a storm in Bamako was keeping the plane grounded. Not wanting to waste time, we left that afternoon for a two-day trip through the region where the Dogon people live. In this fascinating area the people live in villages of mud adobe houses and narrow, round, thatch-roofed granaries crowded together against a long, high escarpment. It is as if the cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde were still inhabited.

Two days later we were back in Mopti and back at the airport. To find out if a plane was coming, they radioed Bamako. We were told that to make a flight worthwhile, there had to be at least six passengers, all the way from Bamako to Timbuktu. (We were also told the plane couldn't take more than nine.) They only had three so far, so if we wanted them to fly, we would have to pay the fare all the way from Bamako. The fare just from Mopti, we had been told, was already $400 for the four of us. We wanted to know how much extra it would be. But before we could find out, radio contact was broken. Amadou suggested we go back to the hotel and try on the short-wave radio there. It took two hours to contact the SMERT office in Bamako, have them call the airport, find out the fare, and call us back. The fare would be $1000 for the four of us. Laurel and I looked at each other, speechless for a moment, then said we'd never be this close to Timbuktu again, swallowed hard, and decided to go for it. But before Amadou could relay our decision to Bamako, atmospheric conditions around Mopti made radio communication impossible.

For consolation, we went to the edge of town and caught a taxi to the ancient city of Djenné, the most enchanting of Mali's cities. It has the most magnificent mosque, and looking down from its minaret at the people in multicolored robes on the flat roofs of the square adobe houses and at the sheep and goats in the clean but unpaved streets, I was reminded of nothing more than the pictures in my old Sunday school books of Old Testament Palestine.

When we returned to Mopti the next night, Amadou met us in the lobby of the hotel, all excited. He said he had arranged it all. We only had to show up at the airport at eleven in the morning. He couldn't go with us, but he assured us we'd have no trouble. We arrived at the airport the next morning at eleven, and found it deserted. I searched around and finally found a radio operator. I asked him when the plane would arrive. He looked at me, puzzled, and said, "It's already left." After we recovered from our hysterics, I asked if there was going to be another plane tomorrow. He said he didn't know; we should come tomorrow at seven in the morning and find out.

The next morning we took no chances. We were at the airport at seven. Two Malian women were waiting there as well. The commandant came out of the radio room and announced that a plane was indeed coming today. Soon another taxi pulled up and out stepped a stout Malian man, with gleaming teeth, wearing a long white robe. With him were his four wives and an indeterminate number of children. Now we began to worry. The plane only held nine passengers, and there were already more than that. And it didn't look like we could pull rank on this man. He carried himself with an air of authority, and everybody at the airport approached him deferentially and shook his hand. So we waited for three hours, certain the plane would come but very discouraged about our chances of getting on it. At 10:30 to break the tension, William took out of his suitcase the three bean bags he had brought along and started to juggle. This broke the ice, and a little later William and Thomas were inside the terminal playing cards with the oldest of the stout man's sons.

Suddenly at eleven o'clock, the plane arrived. A Russian plane. Aeroflot. The Russian crew, in blue jeans, climbed out and lounged off to the side while the plane was unloaded and reloaded. Then the stout man and part of his family – the other part was only there to wish him off, it turned out – walked up the loading ramp onto the plane. We followed right behind, edging Thomas to the front. The stout man had a piece of paper authorizing him to take the plane, which he showed to the officer in charge, a tall slender Malian man who wore paratrooper boots and spoke Russian. We asked the officer if there was room for us as well. He looked at us, looked at Thomas, looked around the plane, looked at Thomas, looked around the plane, and said there was some room on the other side of the sacks of grain. We climbed over, folded down some wooden benches from the side, and strapped ourselves in.

No sooner were we in the air than one of the Russian crew members came out of the cockpit and saw Thomas. His face lit up. Perhaps he was reminded of his own children. He gestured excitedly for Thomas to come with him, and they disappeared into the cockpit. A couple of minutes later we felt the plane tip to the left, then tip to the right, then joggle up and down. I moved to the other side where I could see into the cockpit, and there was Thomas, sitting in the copilot's seat, his hands on the wheel, huge earphones encasing his head, looking at the radar, with the Russian crew gathered around him laughing.

In an hour, we were in Timbuktu. Fortunately, they didn't have Thomas land the plane. As we were leaving the plane, I approached the Malian officer and asked where we paid for the trip. He thought for a moment, and then said, "Oh, never mind."

Timbuktu was once the center of a flourishing civilization. The sixteenth-century Moorish traveller, Leo Africanus, reported that it was a thriving center of commerce and Islamic learning. When the European ships began to ply the African coast in the sixteenth century, however, the trans-Saharan trade began to decline, and the prosperity of Timbuktu along with it, until today it has little left but a modest tourist industry based largely on its name. But now, with Air Mali defunct, even the tourist industry was in decline. When we arrived, we were the only tourists in town. That meant the entire tourist industry was concentrated on us.

We began to realize this shortly after we arrived at the first class Hotel l'Azalai, in the desert a quarter mile from town. My bargaining with the taxi driver from the airport had gone something like this: I asked how much. He said $30. I said $6. We settled for $7.50. But I had been at the hotel no more than fifteen minutes when a man from SMERT approached me. (It was after talking to him that we decided SMERT must stand for "Society for the Monetary Exploitation of Rich Tourists".) He wanted $36 for the taxi. I said I had already paid the driver. He got up, went outside, found the driver, got the $7.50, came back, and said he wanted the rest. He showed me a piece of paper with all the SMERT prices, and there it was – $9 apiece for a taxi ride from the airport. I managed to bargain him down to $27 by claiming Thomas shouldn't count as a person. (Thomas still tells me I owe him $9.)

Also on the slip of paper was something that said a three-mile camel ride for four people would cost $120. I was sure I could find a better price than that privately, and I did. I bargained a man down to $72 (still excessive in comparison with Marine World-Africa USA). We rode them the next morning, galumphing across sand dunes to a Taureg encampment a couple of miles away, imagining the French Foreign Legion. When we got back, the man from SMERT was waiting for us. He wanted us to pay the difference. I didn't, and I'm afraid I didn't control my temper either.

We encountered the lower strata of the tourist industry the minute we stepped out of the hotel to walk about the town. In general, we don't like to have guides. It's more fun to wander around and discover things for yourself. But we were surrounded by twenty boys, all wanting to be our guide, all wanting to take us to their shops. We told them no, and no again, and no again, but they didn't go away. It soon became apparent we weren't going to see any of the city unless we took drastic action. We hired one young man, named Alous, who spoke good English, to be our guide and then hired the biggest remaining boy to beat the others away. This was especially necessary for Thomas. They had seen plenty of other tourists, but they rarely saw Westerners his age, and they would come up and touch him. When he got mad at that, they made fun of him and then came up and pinched him. So we needed someone just to be his bodyguard. (Thomas made friends with some of them later, and was leaping down sand dunes with them beyond the hotel.)

In every old city of Mali the houses are made of mud adobe and line unpaved streets. But each city has its own distinctive touches. In Timbuktu the houses are two-story and have elaborately carved and decorated wooden doors and windows. The streets are of sand that climbs up the mud walls of the houses, and where the houses have been abandoned, takes them over completely. The medieval mosques looked like dried-out sand castles.

As we neared the end of our tour, we happened to look behind us. The sky that had been clear blue was now a turbulent brown, and within seconds it became browner and more turbulent. A sandstorm was approaching. Soon we could feel the tiny particles of sand in the wind. Alous had wanted to get us back to his shop before the sandstorm hit, but it was too late. We had to duck into a random house. It belonged to a Taureg woman, who offered us cushions to sit on. When our eyes adjusted to the dark, I looked around. There was a bed in one corner, a small cooking area in another. The floor was hard, but on top of it was at least two inches of sand. Sand is everywhere in Timbuktu. No one tries to fight it. And now even the atmosphere was sand.

In the middle of the sandstorm William and I ventured out. It was one of the strangest sights I have ever seen. You could see only about twenty or thirty feet in front of you, and not the sky but the very air itself was a bright red orange. It was as though we were on another planet, in an alien atmosphere.

The sandstorm was followed immediately by a rainstorm of torrential proportions, which kept us inside for another half hour. Finally, Alous was impatient to get us to his shop, so we left. Streams of water were scoring gullies down the sandy streets and emptying into growing pools in the low places. Children were splashing in the water. The adults, meanwhile, were going around tearing branches off small trees and bushes. It wasn't until later that I understood this. Evidently, there's a law that says you can't break branches off living trees and bushes for firewood. But once a storm has broken off the branches, you can go around and pick them up. The people we saw were just interpreting the phrase "broken off" very loosely.

That night I woke up at three o'clock in the morning in a cold sweat. How were we going to get out of this place?

The next morning we engaged a taxi privately, not through SMERT, for only $6, and went out to the airport with all our luggage, in hopes of seeing the cargo plane. When we arrived, it was there, already loading. Our adrenelin started pumping. As we approached, one of the Russian crew saw Thomas and greeted him enthusiastically. Our chances looked good. But the Russian told us we had better check with the Malian officer. We did. They couldn't take us. Ordinarily planes and trucks leave Timbuktu empty. Timbuktu produces nothing the rest of the world wants. But today they were returning a load of extra lumber and sheet metal the town had been oversupplied with. The officer didn't want passengers with cargo like that flying around to decapitate them, and we couldn't disagree.

We also learned the cargo plane wouldn't be back for three or four days.

We returned to town, got rooms at the second class hotel, and began to look for other ways to escape. There was a desert track – tire tracks in the deep sand – the 265 miles from Timbuktu east to Gao. Then we'd have to backtrack 360 miles to Mopti, but that was over mostly paved road, and we could do it by taxi. If we could rent a Land Rover and a driver to take us to Gao, the rest should be easy. We asked Alous what he could arrange.

Alous introduced us to a man who called himself Popcorn. He had worked eight years for American oil men, and they had given him that nickname when he ate too much of it one night. Popcorn sat down with us and figured out a fair price, adding up what a truck would charge for four passengers riding on top of its load, payment for the driver (Popcorn, I assumed), and the cost of gas and oil, adding 20% for detours since it had rained recently. He came up with a figure of $420. That was a lot, but there was no other way out, and Popcorn struck me as honest, competent, and reliable, someone we could trust to get us across the desert. He went off to look for a Land Rover.

When he hadn't returned for a couple of hours, we began to get worried, and approached the SMERT people to ask them about renting a Land Rover. They checked their list of prices and said it would cost \$450. The only hitch was that their Land Rover was up on blocks and they'd have to find one in town. This meant that while Popcorn was going around town hitting everyone who owned a Land Rover, in order of quality, the SMERT people were going around after him to all the same places. Around three o'clock in the afternoon they both showed up with their Land Rovers. I took test rides in both, doing figure-eights around the sand dunes and running through the gears. Popcorn had started looking first and hence had returned with the better vehicle. There were violent arguments between Popcorn and the SMERT people, but it was all in Taureg and I couldn't understand. Popcorn dropped his price to \$390, and SMERT to \$375, and as a parting shot, the man from SMERT said if we didn't go with them, we might get harassed by the police. The threat infuriated me, and the way I told him I didn't want to deal with him was not at all polite. We chose Popcorn's Land Rover.

I sat down on the veranda of the hotel with a beer to enjoy the fading afternoon, while Popcorn went off to make the preparations.

He returned an hour later and said he needed money to buy the gas and oil. We did some calculations, and I gave him \$105. Suddenly, with my money in his pocket, his personality went through a transformation. He was no longer honest, competent, and trustworthy. Instead, he became sleazy, obsequious and avaricious. He told me I should buy him a beer. When he got that, he said, "Maybe you buy beers for all my friends," pointing to the men around him. I did. Then he disappeared with my money.

Shortly after dark he showed up again, and said there was a "little problem". "A little problem, but no problem." I should get in the Land Rover with him and three other men, and he'd explain. I left my passport and money with Laurel, took William along as a bodyguard, and climbed in. We went to the house of the woman who owned the vehicle, and, on her roof, sat down to negotiate. It seems that after buying \$45 worth of gas and oil, she had reconsidered the price. She now wanted to charge me more like \$600. Negotiations got nowhere, and finally Popcorn said he knew a man who owned a Toyota Land Cruiser that was in very good condition. We went to see him. His name was Hussein. We sat on the carpet in his upper apartment, and he offered us tea. He wanted \$375. The disadvantage was that the Land Cruiser had an open back, and while Laurel and Thomas could sit comfortably in the cab, William and I had to bounce up and down in the back. But it looked like our only option at this point. Popcorn gave Hussein the $60 he had left over, as a down payment. They told us they'd pick us up at the hotel at six in the morning. As we returned, Popcorn asked me for more money so he could buy some chicken for his mother.

They showed up at 7:30. Popcorn laughed at me scornfully as I walked around checking the Land Cruiser, and he told me to buy him a drink. We drove out of town and, a mile beyond, stopped in the desert. The agreement had been that I would pay half the money at the beginning of the trip and half at the end. Now they wanted the rest of the first half. It was here that the misunderstanding became apparent. My view was that the $45 I had paid Popcorn that the first woman had spent on gas and oil, was money I had already paid toward the trip, regardless of how it had been spent. Hussein's view was that he wanted $375, and the $45 was strictly between me and Popcorn. Popcorn tried to mediate by telling me to deduct the $45 from what I was going to tip him in Gao. In the first place, I had thought any payment for Popcorn was included in the $375, and in any case, I knew that $45 was far more than a reasonable payment for what Popcorn had done for us. We argued for half an hour, hunched over, scribbling numbers in the sand and erasing each other's numbers. It was all getting uglier. Finally, Laurel and I looked at each other and said, "Do we want to go out into the desert with these people?" We told them to take us back to town. They said they wouldn't, but when we grabbed our suitcases and started to walk, they turned around and drove us back. As we were driving through the main plaza, on the way to the hotel, Popcorn waved at a thin, distinguished-looking young man in a blue robe. "He's the most important man in Timbuktu," he said. It was a man we had talked to at the airport the day before. I said we should stop and let him settle the dispute.

The agreement we worked out was this. For our protection, we would leave our names with the man – his name was Sidi Koutam. We would pay Hussein nothing until we got to Gao, and then we would pay him the $375 he wanted. Popcorn could have whatever he could recover of the $45 spent on gas and oil. And Popcorn could not go with us. I was fed up with his incessant grovelling and begging for money.

Just as we were about to leave again, Sidi said he'd like to go to Gao too. Wait five minutes while he packed and he'd join us. We did, and he did, and we were on our way.

Hussein spoke little French, and I understood little, but as we left, he made the perfect comment about the side of Timbuktu we had experienced. “Those men who hang around the hotel and speak six languages,” he said, “they’re all thieves.”

The trip itself was a succession of incidents. An hour out of Timbuktu, we encountered another sandstorm. We stopped long enough to put a canvas top over the back. It didn’t help much. It was torn right where we were sitting, and for the rest of the trip William and I were covered with a thin brown abrasive layer of grit. Hussein couldn’t see more than twenty feet in front of him, but that didn’t stop him. He kept plowing along the track through the whole sandstorm. And this was not your ordinary driving. Since it had rained recently, there were puddles we could sink into if we followed the most heavily used tire tracks. He had to make split second decisions every few seconds when he saw tracks diverge.

The sandstorm was over by the time we reached a small village an hour later. Hussein seemed to know everyone in this town, and he had to stop and visit with them all. It was another hour before we got out of the town, and when we did, we had acquired one more passenger, an old man, and two large sacks of grain. I was paying for the Land Cruiser, but Hussein didn’t ask me if the new acquisitions were all right with me. On the other hand, I didn’t feel I was in a position to object.

At first, Hussein wanted to put the sacks of grain right up against the cab, but that’s where we were sitting, so I wouldn’t let him. He put them farther back. In another half hour, we had a flat tire. (For the rest of the trip we were travelling without a spare.) Hussein said it was because the sacks were throwing the vehicle off balance and we had to put them next to the cab. I acquiesed, and William, Sidi, and I sat on our suitcases along the side.

The track was of course very bumpy, and at one point a few minutes later, the vehicle hit a particularly big bump, I flew up off the suitcase, and my head hit the sharp metal frame that supported the canvas top. I looked up and saw it covered with blood. I felt my head with my hand. Nothing seemed broken, but my hand was covered with blood. We stopped. Hussein wanted to put brake fluid on the cut, but fortunately Laurel had some antisceptic in her suitcase.

In the middle of the afternoon, we reached the village of Etainge, about halfway to Gao. It consisted of half a dozen small adobe houses scattered around the sand dunes, and a one-room building with a sign over the door saying “Restaurant Moula Moula”. We all went in and sat in a circle on the floor. They seemed to have two sorts of food. One was a very industrial looking carton from Switzerland labelled “Complete Food Biscuits” – dry, starchy, and tasteless. Then they mixed a concoction of dried milk, large chunks of sugar, and the Awa mineral water that we always drank. I figured all the ingredients were safe, so I might as well try it. It tasted as bad as it sounds. Afterwards William pointed out to me that the Awa bottle was one that we had emptied and they had filled from the goatskin bag of water hanging on the side of the Land Cruiser, that they had filled that morning from the pond in front of our hotel.

The ride in the late afternoon was cool, blue and beautiful across the desert, and we stood in the back and let the wind blow in our faces. Whenever we thought we were in absolutely uninhabitable country, we'd see a Taureg woman dragging a goat behind her in the distance. When night came, we tried without success to curl up in comfortable positions to sleep in as the vehicle bounced and lurched on.

At eleven o'clock Hussein couldn't go on. He was exhausted. He pulled off the track into the dunes and we all lay down for the night under the stars. They took the canvas top off the back for the four of us to sleep on.

Everyone got up at five the next morning and started off right away. The track roughly follows the Niger River, but you can see the river only a few places along the way. We had been going for about an hour when the river came into view. But there was a problem. It was on the wrong side of the road. We had been driving the wrong direction for the last hour. We turned around and several hours later finally rolled into Gao.

On the whole 265-mile, day-and-a-half trip we saw only three other vehicles, and two of those were broken down.

The taxi ride from Gao to Mopti was, by comparison, without incident, but our troubles weren't over yet. In fact, two days before we were to fly home I counted back to see when the last day was that nothing major had gone wrong. It was two weeks before. We were hassled by the revolutionary police in Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta). We had to sleep half the night on our suitcases in the aisle on the train from Burkina Faso to Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast. We were stopped by the police without our passports our first night in Abidjan, and had to argue our way out of bribing them. (They asked me if we'd ever go outside in America witout our identity cards; I said we didn't have identity cards; he was incredulous – how could the people be controlled?) The first car we rented in Ivory Coast had a hole in the floor, and a day on country roads painted us and everything we owned with red dirt. The doorknob broke when Thomas was in the bathroom of our hotel room in Abidjan, and the door had to be broken down with crowbars to get him out. The final blow was when Pan Am held us hostage for $600 before letting us make a small but necessary change in our flight home from Abidjan.

Whenever you travel with another person, your vision is doubled. Laurel, who teaches knitting and needlework, notices details of dress that are simply invisible to me. But travelling with the children not only gave us their vision; it led us into situations we wouldn't have encountered otherwise. It got us out of a few situations too.

William is a showman. He could win over whole villages with his juggling. As we walked around a village near Mopti, surrounded by every little boy in the village, William shouted to them, "Hello!" "Hello!" they shouted back. William shouted, "How are you!" and they repeated, "How are you!" Then he shouted, "America is great!" and their response rang through the air: "America is great!" In Timbuktu, in the worst moments of being plagued by the throngs of children, William told them he'd teach them some useful English to use with tourists, and then he had them all repeat after him, "I want to extort money from you!"

He's also big. He's as tall as I am and lifts weights. Everyone thought he was twenty-one. I took him along with me as a bodyguard more than once, and he was nice to have just as company whenever I went off to negotiate for a taxi, look for a hotel, or just walk around at night exploring. I started asking his advice seriously when decisions were to be made. He and I debated for a long time, for example, when trying to decide whether to go with Hussein to Gao, and I finally took his advice. As a consequence, I now know that he can handle himself in difficult situations, a great comfort now that we're back in America and he's in high school.

Thomas is a different story. This wasn't his kind of trip. His idea of a vacation is two weeks on the beach at a first-class hotel in Hawaii. He always accuses us bitterly of not taking vacations, only taking trips. He had not looked forward to this trip at all. We went to Mexico several years ago, and he was afraid West Africa would have the same dirt and poverty we found there. We were not in Bamako more than two hours when he turned to us and said solemnly, "This isn't like Mexico." He could tell the difference between a developing country and a country that isn't even in the game. We tried to protect him by giving him the best seats in the taxis and letting him stay in the first-class hotel courtyards while we walked around the towns. But there was only so much we could do. He had stomach trouble for two days.

In one respect, Thomas helped us out in a big way. When we had to deal with the police, Thomas's job was to stand right up front and look cute and slightly sad. He did this in the Bamako police station when we applied for our photography permits. (Tourists in Mali can't take pictures without this permit.) Everyone else waiting in line was told to come back tomorrow, but they looked at Thomas and processed our application right away.

His biggest coup came at the border crossing from Mali to Burkina Faso. We were in a taxi with two French women in their twenties and a Malian man. We had ridden six hours from Mopti when we arrived at the border. The Malian police officer swaggered out to the car, looked at our passports, and said we had to return to Mopti for exit visas. I knew exit visas weren't required. After we all argued for a while, he said that he could issue the exit visas himself for $15 apiece. The French women were outraged. They said it was pure extortion, and they stalked off to the commandant's house several hundred yards away. A few minutes later, they returned, saying no one was at home. The police officer said to them, "Why did you go to my house? I'm here."

The French women still refused to pay. They told the driver to drive on through the border. But he had to live here; he wasn't going to try that. So we sat, occasionally arguing with the officer. After a while, the price had dropped to $9 apiece. At this point I told the French women I was willing to pay for us and them as well, but they refused to let me. We continued to sit.

All this time Thomas was getting more and more distressed. He told me to pay the bribe, and finally he said, "I'll pay the bribe!"

"You don't have the money," I said.

"Deduct it from my college education!"

Finally he pulled out his souvenier snakeskin wallet that had $6 in it, and said, "I'll give him this." I thought, why not? and let him out of the taxi.

He stormed up to the officer, on that border between melodrama and hysteria that kids negotiate so well, waving the $6 in the air and shouting, "Here's the bribe! Here's the bribe!"

The officer was mortified to be seen trying to extort money from a child. He stood up, waved us past with a contemptuous gesture, and swaggered into his hut.

When we got to Abidjan, we treated ourselves to two nights at the luxurious Intercontinental Hotel Ivoire, one of those hotels that have six restaurants and a pool surrounding the casino. Its name in flowers in the garden is visible from half the city. The first thing Thomas did when we got to our room was pick up the room service menu. I told him, “The prices there are three times what they are downstairs. Just get on the elevator, and you can get it a lot cheaper.”

“Are you kidding?” he said. “If I’m gonna stay in a five-star hotel, I’m gonna have breakfast in bed.”

We let him. He had earned it.