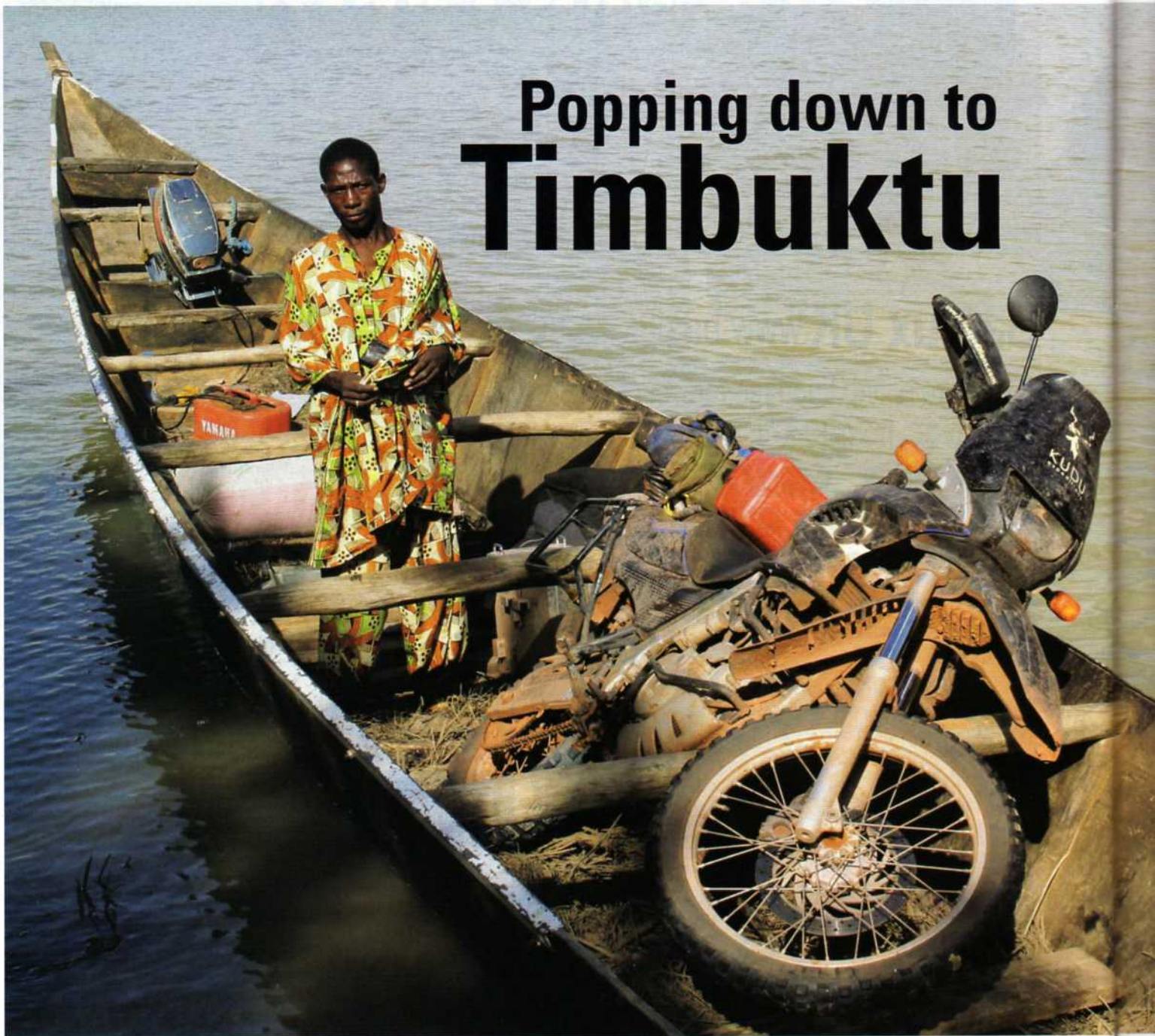


Text & Photos: Lee Mears



# Popping down to Timbuktu

**“**You have no peanuts for me?” It was said half as a question and half as a statement of an almost inconceivable fact. A look of slight confusion and heart-felt disappointment spread across the man’s face and I suddenly felt very bad. I’m not sure what to say but I come out with some lame excuses and promise that I will bring peanuts for him on my way back in a couple of days. He looks suitably unimpressed and is clearly still struggling to grasp the concept that I have actually turned up without peanuts. After 10 long minutes in the blazing Malian sun the understanding is reached that peanuts or no peanuts – he’s going to have to get me across the river and a price is quickly settled.

I’m stood on the southern banks of the Niger River trying to negotiate my way onto a pirogue. With a bit of luck it will get me to the other side and my destination – the fabled desert town of Timbuktu. I had been told that it was the custom to take a bag of peanuts to give to the boat men who are the only means of crossing the river. The last remnants of that ingrained European cynicism, which Africa invariably takes away with time, had led me to ignore my advisors in my rush to get on with the trip. Now distracted by the problem of how to get a 200kg bike from the shore and into the boat, peanuts were thankfully off the agenda.

A work party was quickly formed from the crowd of joking, smiling men and boys who had been stood around gazing in wonder at me and my bike since I

had arrived. After 15 minutes of chaotic heaving, pushing and lifting my boots were filled to their brims with water, and the bike was in the boat.

Strictly speaking I am here “working” – conducting a recce for a trans-Africa expedition leaving in March 2006, run by Kudu Expeditions. It’s just another day in the office as the entirely underpowered outboard motor puts into life and we move off into the vast brown expanse that is the Niger River – lifeblood of whole swathes of West African Sahel. We are no more than 20m from the shore before the frantic bailing begins. Ten years ago I would have been worried – now I figure as long as they’re smiling there’s nothing to worry about.

My expedition up to Timbuktu had begun in

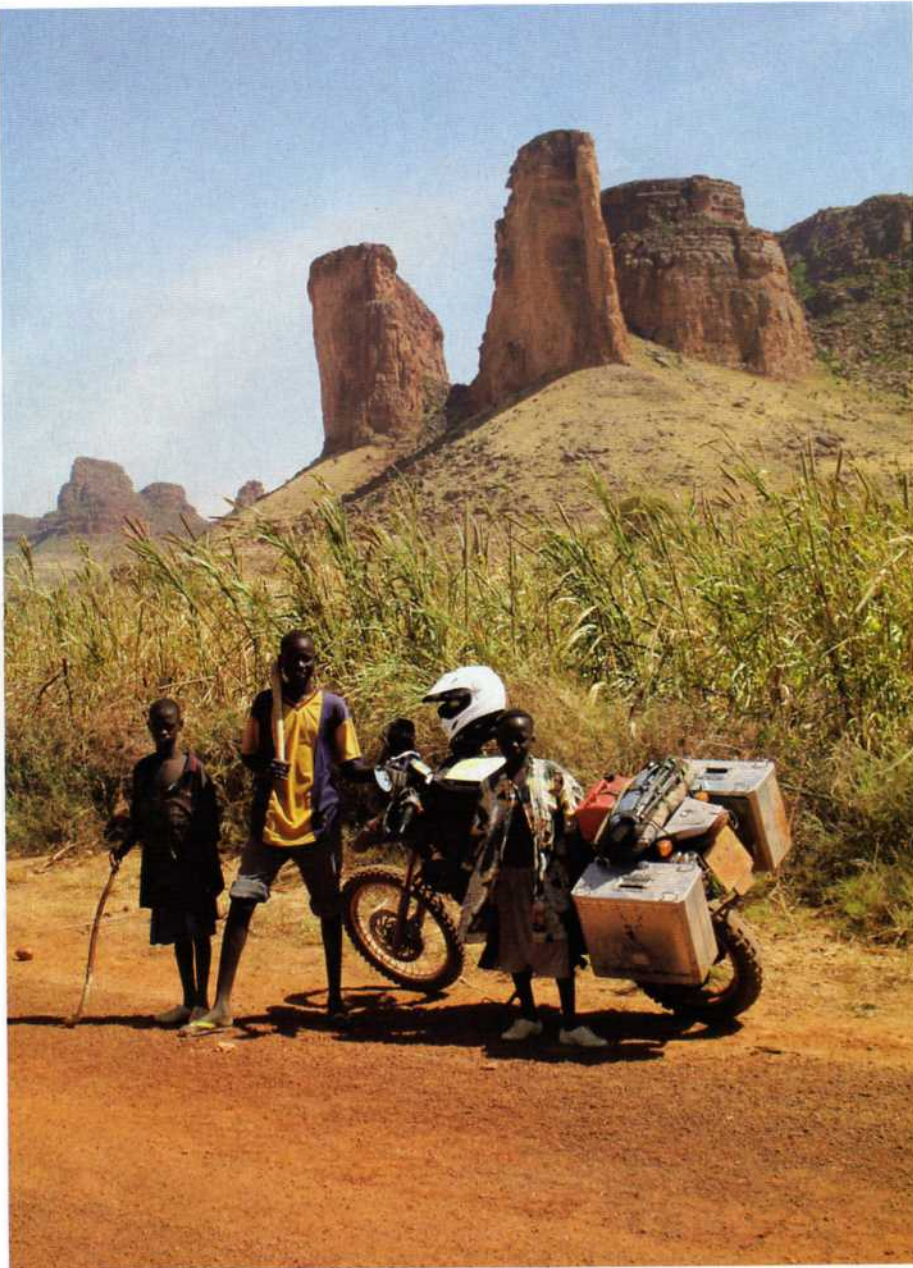
Lee Mears discovers  
Timbuktu is  
a rewarding  
destination for the  
committed rider.



'peanuts or no peanuts - he's going to have to get me across the river'

earnest the day I left the ancient town of Mopti 300 miles to my south west. Situated at the end of a five-mile causeway out onto the vast floodplains of the Niger River, Mopti has an almost medieval quality to it. Slowly riding the causeway itself is a serene experience. I glance from left to right at the goings on in the lush, green pastures below me. Children play rowdily in the water, men and women take their daily bath and wading fishermen cast nets as they must have done for a thousand years or more. Passing under the ornate and imposing archway located at the entrance to the town, the sights, sounds and smells of Mali are everywhere. The bike weaves between darting mopeds, ambling cows and a constant stream of people going about their daily lives. Wailing minarets are calling the



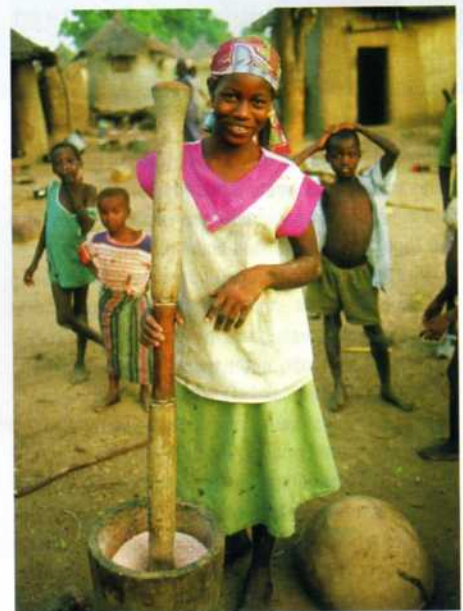


faithful to evening prayer as I reluctantly bring my day's ride to an end and pull into the campsite. I'm tired, unwashed, caked from head to foot in reddy brown dust and filled with contentment as I sit in the warm evening air, sipping away on a cold beer in deepest West Africa.

Mopti is my staging post before I tackle the difficult part up to Timbuktu itself. Leaving the next day I find good tarmac road through the African bush for a 100 miles or so to the junction town of Douentza. The biggest problems for a biker arise in the small market villages which dot this one and only road east through northern Mali. As I enter each one the road gradually becomes consumed by feet, hooves and wheels as hundreds of people, animals and carts swarm from one side of the road to the other and back again. It seems to be market day in every settlement I pass through and even the rare vehicles I come across in between towns are fully loaded with produce. I get an enthusiastic thumbs up from a fellow biker who rides past me with perhaps a 100 live chickens strapped to his small Yamaha.

Having started at seven in the morning, by 10.30 I am having a late breakfast of omelette, bread and coffee at a roadside stall in Douentza. From this point on the tarmac ends and I head up into the southernmost reaches of the Sahara and away from civilisation.

An inconspicuous and unmarked dirt track takes me away into the baking savannah. In places it is broken up by the recent rains and in others so badly corrugated that the bike threatens to shed itself of every bolt that's holding it together. It is truly spectacular scenery though. Stopping to take a photo three young boys, out alone herding goats, come over to say hello. Puzzled by the strange man and his motorcycle, apparently taking pictures of absolutely nothing, they stand and watch amazed. I take a picture of them by the bike and exhibit the results on the digital display and for five minutes they can't stop smiling and laughing. I eventually





'In spite of the poverty all I seem to hear is laughter'

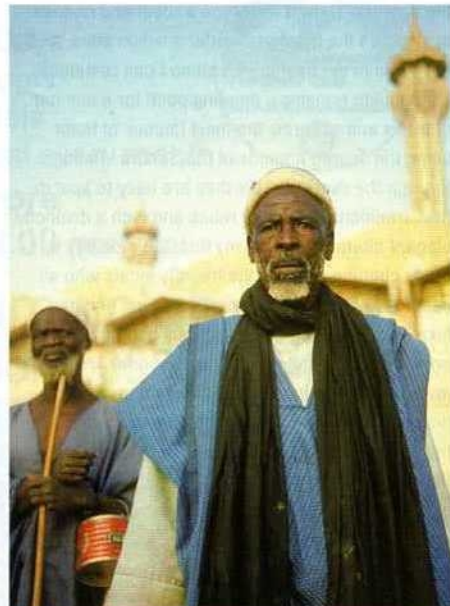
manage to prise my camera from their fingers and ride on, to see them frantically waving me off in the rear view mirror. These are the kind of encounters you have every day in Africa and it is why I love the continent so much. An ability to laugh and enjoy life is the one common factor that pervades the people of the region, and it is a welcome tonic for an inherently sceptical westerner.

Four hours of bone shaking dust, sand and mud

later and I find myself looking at the face of a man who has clearly been deprived of peanuts on the banks of the Niger River. The crossing is a memorable experience thanks to the sights slowly passing to the left and right of me as we work our way towards the north bank. Mud villages nestle the shore and immaculate African women prepare food while hoards of youngsters charge about, swimming, playing, sometimes fighting. In spite of

the poverty all I seem to hear is laughter. A short while later and I am standing on the river's northern shore, a stone's throw from the town of Timbuktu itself. The last few miles are perfect tarmac once again and before long I am riding into the fabled town itself – 5000 miles and three weeks after leaving the UK.

It is often said that Timbuktu is now a shadow of its former self and this is true to an extent. In spite





of this it is still a fascinating place to come to and getting here by motorbike is without doubt a life goal for many a biker, daydreaming of adventure while enduring dreary British winters. It has been a great centre of learning in its past and one of the most important markets for trans-Sahara trade for hundreds of years. Even now it exudes an incredible sense of history and creates the sensation in me that I have just entered somewhere truly exotic and important. I'm not sure that it can be possible to feel any more detached from my life in England than I feel now. I ride past local tribesmen languorously strolling the sandy streets in their flowing robes. Heavily laden camels occasionally meander across the road coming from, or returning to the depths of the Sahara to the north. Finding my accommodation is easy with the help of a friendly local guide who bizarrely goes by the name of 'Detroit'. I forego a room and choose to sleep on the hotel roof under a billion stars, and have one of the best night's sleep I can remember.

Timbuktu remains a meeting point for a number of tribes and cultures, the most famous of them being the Tuareg nomads of the Sahara. Riding through the sandy streets they are easy to spot in their traditional light blue robes and with a distinctly elegant bearing. A lot of my time the next day is spent chatting away to the friendly locals who all seem to have heard of the arrival of me and my bike. A few Tuareg guides politely try and sell me ornate daggers and amulets as I wander around town but quickly move on to pleasant and welcoming conversation when I show no interest. Invariably passionate and proud of their heritage they enjoy telling me tales of their lives in the desert and the history of this famous settlement.

I find myself in a town quite unlike any other I have been to before and I'm enjoying myself all the more for the toughness of the journey which has

bought me here. Inevitably it is a journey which is going to have to be repeated in reverse because all that lies beyond Timbuktu is the Sahara Desert and the bandits who populate it. In preparation for the trip back I go over the bike, tightening bolts and ruing the absence of Loctite in my tool box. Riding down the town's main street on my way out I pass numerous people who have befriended me in the short time I have been in Timbuktu. Each one waves me off with a shout of good luck as I make my way back to the shores of the Niger.

Never would I have imagined that a bag of peanuts could instil such pure joy in a human being. Stepping out of the pirogue and onto the southern banks of the river I'm greeted by the man

I had so cruelly disappointed on my way north a couple of days previously. I pull out the bag of nuts and hand them to him, and with that an impossibly large smile spreads across his face. He begins shouting and laughing to the people around him who all appear equally as pleased. Clearly I have made amends and so I feel I can now leave this part of the world with a conscience as clear as when I had arrived. I am energetically waved off by the 20 or more grinning faces who have now congregated at the riverside. Once again I face the 150 miles of arduous dirt tracks in search of tarmac and my route south.

There is no doubt that Timbuktu is an amazing and unique place and it is made all the more special by the effort needed to reach it. Not only is it physically isolated, but culturally it is hard to imagine anywhere less like that homogenous western culture from which I have come. Five hundred years ago it would have been the economic, intellectual and cultural keystone to an entire region to rival anywhere of comparison in Britain. A sense of what that that must have been like remains in the town, and in the pride that the local people display in their culture and history. Popping down to Timbuktu may not be the easiest thing in the world to try and do on a motorcycle, but neither is it the hardest – and it is undoubtedly one of the most rewarding, enjoyable and memorable experiences you can have.

Kudu Expeditions specialises in motorbike adventures across Africa and includes the legendary town in its 2006 UK to South Africa trip. You can find out more about what the company gets up to or even how to join one of its expeditions by visiting the website, or getting in contact using the details below. **MSL**

www.kuduexpeditions.com  
email: info@kuduexpeditions.com  
Tel: 01480 819364

