

The Journal



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Chapter 4: Mali, Burkina & Niger

Day 29: Tambakounda to Kayes, Mali

After an early start we arrived at the border to Mali raring to go. The border is set rather impressively on a bridge and having eventually discovered the correct offices we made our way across the bridge and found ourselves in our next country, Mali. The surroundings had changed fairly subtly over the last couple of hundred miles as it became more lush and verdant and flat plains started to show some undulation. A less pleasant change was going from tarmac to pot holed track again and our speed reduced to a crawl at times.



Andy hunting spiders

Despite this we enjoyed the friendly atmosphere that Mali provided, with kids and adults alike waving at us as we drove through the many small villages. We made reasonable time over the poor road surface and despite stopping in Kayes to purchase another insurance document and another run in with the local police, we made our first bush camp an hour outside of town before nightfall.

This was our first night of camping in the bush without being advised by locals or in a campsite. It was quite exciting as we pulled off the road and found a dramatic pitch surrounded by a rolling landscape of hills and sparse trees. We settled into our usual routine and soon found ourselves under a canopy of stars tucking into dinner with relish. Slightly more dramatic and a little worrying was the glow of a fire sweeping through the valley. Even though Andy tried to distract us by duelling with spiders, we still endured another fairly sleepless night as we woke almost on an hourly basis to check the fire was not getting any closer to us. Thankfully it carried on down the valley away from us and we avoided any rapid evacuation of our campsite.

Day 30: Kayes to Bamako

Because of our relatively sleepless night we didn't exactly leap out of bed but nonetheless managed to be on the road again and making our way towards the capital city of Bamako. We had picked up a newly laid road outside Kayes and were pleasantly surprised to find it carrying on way beyond where we were expecting. This

meant that we had made a considerable mileage by the time the road eventually ran out and we were looking like we could make Bamako by nightfall.

We first had to make our way over the remaining couple of hundred miles of dirt track and we passed other trucks and bikes making the same journey. With about 150 miles to go before we got to Bamako we found ourselves confronted by a scene we were not even remotely prepared for. On the road in front of us lay a motorbike with its rider slumped to one side.

Having read many warnings of car-jackings with people feigning injury to get cars to stop and then hijacking the vehicles we were highly suspicious and approached with caution. Unfortunately it rapidly became all too apparent that this was no set up and we had come across one of the many tragic fatal road accidents that leave African roads littered with the carcasses of vehicles and a horrifying death toll.

Perhaps it was lucky that we came across the dead man ourselves rather than someone else as we had all at least seen the ravages of car accidents before in A&E and were able to establish that the man was beyond help and have at least some exposure to this kind of thing.

We would however be lying if we said it was not a truly horrendous experience that left us all shaken.

We drove the remaining miles sickened and after alerting the police continued to Bamako where we found a campsite in the centre of town, had dinner and collapsed shattered for the night.

Day 31: Bamako to Sikasso



Starting to look a little scruffy...

Bamako proved to be a pleasant surprise, especially after the difficult previous day. We were ready for something positive and hoped we would get the visa for Burkina Faso that we needed with a minimum of hassle.

Sadly there was a less than auspicious start to the day as Austin and Giles found out the hard way the deficiencies in the Mosquito protection that Bert's roof tent provided. They awoke to the always disappointing high-pitched whine of mosquitoes dive bombing their faces.

We could swear we could hear the mozzies singing as they lurched back to their homes drunk on haem. Little buggers.

After much amused inspection of the facial swelling Giles had on show (one actually stung his eyelid!) we headed off to the Burkinese embassy to see if we could sort out the visa.

Having established that the embassy had moved to the other side of town we eventually dropped off our passports and went into town to get some supplies. Bamako itself was a cracking mixture of old French colonial buildings and the bustle of any large modern African town. Set amongst the rolling hills it made a good impression on us all despite the insect attacks.

Much to our joy we found our visas ready for collection at midday and we were back on the road again having picked up another bonus day (we are now about three days ahead of schedule since leaving The Gambia.

We moved on another couple of hundred miles and once again struck off into the bush to set up camp for the night. Yet again the bush camp served us well for the evening and even the shower (a 5 litre plant sprayer converted for the job) has been surprisingly good and efficient.

Tomorrow we will see if we can make it across the border into Burkina and on to the capital Ouagadougou (surely the best named capital yet!) where we need to pick up the latest info on routes/visas etc before continuing on. The decision as to whether we will still attempt the route via TChad/CAR/Sudan needs to be made and rather depends on our ability to get a pass for Southern Sudan. Fingers crossed.

Day 32: Sikasso to Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

Having slept well following a night undisturbed by mossies, fires or local children we set off for the Burkina border. The Carnet again worked wonders and we crossed into our ninth country without any spurious 'border taxes'.

Bert continued with his 'go-slow' policy but fortunately there were tarmaced roads all the way to Ouagadougou and we made relatively speedy and uneventful progress. At the customary police checkpoint, usually 10kms outside each major town we were stopped by one of the officials. Focused on his aim of extracting cash from us, he embarked on a thorough inspection of all our safety equipment (fire extinguisher, safety triangles etc).



How to squeeze an 8 foot Land Rover through a 7 foot 6 inch garage door

It seems in Ouaga that it is fine to have no working suspension, bald tyres and an engine capable of single-handedly causing the Greenhouse effect but no triangle and they will hand out ridiculous fines.

Ouagadougou is a vibrant West African city whose constant blanket of smog makes the daytime temperatures (36-42⁰C) feel even more oppressive. We were hopeful that the Ouaga Land Rover dealership listed on the internet might be able to cure Bert's ills. We drove to a small hostel recommended in the guide book. This had a small warehouse for parking cars with an entrance just a little shorter than the vehicles with the added height of jerry can brackets and roof tents. In the fading light we spent an entertaining hour reducing tyre pressures, loading the vehicle bonnets with passing local children and attempting to squeeze the vehicles into the warehouse without destroying it. With the vehicles safely stowed we had a meal and collapsed after a hard 5 days driving.

Days 33 to 37: Ouagadougou

On our first morning we split up to try and get started on both acquiring Niger visas and fixing the vehicle. The unfriendly immigration official initially said that the visas may be ready that day. However, when we failed to respond to his subtle hints that he required 'motivation' to achieve the lengthy process of lifting up the stamp and placing on a page in our passport, he changed his tune and said that we'd have to come back next week!

The Land Rover Dealership was a little disappointing and turned out to be a general workshop with no other Land Rovers to be seen. Their initial attempt to restore Bert to full power by changing the fuel filter made no difference. We phoned Chris at Footloose who as ever was ready with excellent advice and had provided us with the required oil seal in our spares box to repair the transfer gearbox leak.



Catching a taxi in Ouagadougou

Otherwise Ouaga has been a chance to recharge and rest for a few days and try and gather more information about the potential difficulties in Central Africa which we expect to be the most demanding section of the journey down. We had the chance to speak to others returning from Chad and also catch up on the progress of the AfricaOverland Expedition (4 Americans in similar vehicles, taking a similar route to us).

Day 38: Ouagadougou to Niamey, Niger

With the oil leak eventually fixed but still no closer to solving Bert's lost power we decided to press on to Niamey. The reports of bandits around Niamey meant we were keen to make it there in one day and avoid bush camping. Fortunately the roads were sealed and in quite good condition except for a small stretch just before and after the border and there were no problems on the border itself, meaning we were able to make it to Niamey just before six o'clock. The Lonely Planet describes Niamey as 'like the end of the Earth' but we were much more impressed. We found it much more modern and friendly than we'd expected and with a pleasant (if noisy) campsite in the heart of town.

We decided to treat ourselves to a meal out and after failing to find our first choice restaurant ended up at a very nice Chinese to fill our faces. Tired we headed to bed at our usual ten o'clock - crazy.

Day 39: Niamey to Birnin Konni

We were woken at just after five by the call to prayer - never the best alarm call - and got up shortly after. Andy and Giles headed to the Chad Embassy in town whilst Austin and Duncan did the daily vehicle checks (fluid levels, tyres etc) and crawled around under the cars to check there'd been no more oil leaks. All was looking good and we all agreed that we would keep our fingers crossed and plan to drive to Chad before addressing Bert's loss of power again.

The Chad Embassy had our visas ready a couple of hours later and after a 'quick' visit to the bank (no ATMs) we were all done by lunch-time. As we'd thought getting the Chad visas might take 24 hours we decided to make the most of our extra time and head out of Niamey straight away. Again with the thoughts of banditry in our minds we wanted to make it a good few hundred miles away before pitching camp. Despite shocking roads inside Niamey, the roads outside town were good and we made it to near Birnin Konni, pulled off the road behind some bushes (to keep out of sight) and set camp. Giles treated us to wonderful Hamburgers for supper (who says you have to rough it) and we settled in for the night.