

## *Sahel: A West African Journey*

A GlobeScope Expeditions production

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### Synopsis

Sahel is the Arabic word for border. This seasonally dry West African region of steppes, thorny woodlands and grassy savannas lies between the barren rocks and sands of the Sahara Desert and the forests of equatorial Africa. Thus, the Sahel is the land that borders the desert and separates it from the humid forestlands farther to the south. This transition zone between desert and forest is noted for its climatic uncertainties and periodic droughts. However, the Sahel is also a land where vibrant spots of color are etched against a largely monochromatic background. These colors, and the vibrancy of life they reveal, are reflected in the traditions of its ethnically diverse peoples. Distinctive costumes, evocative art, lively music, and fantastic dances are all part of the cultural heritage of the Sahel. Our route takes us through the West African countries of Senegal and Mali, both of which are predominantly Muslim lands that were formerly parts of French West Africa.

Our journey begins on the Atlantic shores of Senegal. Here, Goree Island, just off shore from Senegal's capital of Dakar, offers insights into a slave trade that resulted in the transportation of millions of West Africans to the Americas. A visit to Goree's slave house is especially evocative for African Americans, some of whose ancestors may have passed through its portals.

Additional explorations in coastal Senegal include visits to busy towns, colorful country markets, and fishing villages where boats bring in their catches at the end of the day. Landscapes range from sandy beaches and an estuary rich in bird life to palm savannas where women prepare the peanut harvest for market.

To prepare for an overland journey to Mali, we consult a gris-gris specialist, or diviner, who casts cowry shells and makes us a gris-gris to insure the success of our venture. After a difficult start, we move eastward, passing through rural landscapes and visiting a small village where a new school has been built for the community's many children. The next day we visit Niokolo Koba National Park, one of the largest National Parks in West Africa and one of the few places in the region where a variety of wildlife may be sighted.

Eastward from the park we pass through sparsely settled baobab savannas, finally reaching the Mali town of Kayes, once an important port on the Senegal River. Sand tracks lead north from Kayes to a remote town near the border with Mauritania. From there we follow country roads southward to Mali's capital of Bamako. This part of our adventure provides an object lesson on the problems of deforestation, over grazing and resulting desertification. In Bamako we visit a museum and learn about the cultural significance of West Africa's remarkable artistic traditions.

Beyond Bamako, our route follows the Niger River deep into its remarkable inland delta with many farm villages and important agricultural traditions. Near the town of Segou we visit a carpet factory then cross the Niger by pirogue to a Bozo fishing village noted for its diviners.

A brief history of the origins and spread of herding and farming, the development of the trans-Saharan trade in salt, gold, and other high value commodities, the rise of West African kingdoms, and the spread of Islam into the Sahel introduce our visit to Djenne, one of the oldest settlements in West Africa. Once the most important trading stop south of Timbuktu, Djenne is still noted for its colorful markets and famous mud-brick mosque. Mopti, downstream from Djenne, now surpasses Djenne as a trading center. From here we watch heavily laden boats heading toward the port for Timbuktu, a desert city three days from Mopti by river.

Our final destination is Mali's Dogon country lying in the shadow of the Bandiagara Escarpment. After reviewing the history and animist traditions of the Dogon people, we visit several villages, watch artists at work, and climb to the cliff sheltered granaries, tombs, and abandoned homes that line the escarpment making it resemble a gigantic version of Mesa Verde. Many of the Dogon people resisted conversion to Islam and examples of African art illustrate the meaning of Dogon beliefs. The climax of our visit comes with a masked dance performance honoring the ancestors of the Dogon.