

Mali with children

sample journey

My parents want to travel to Mali.

It's a country in Africa. If you take a look at the map of Africa, it is kind of in the middle of the round area in the upper left.

I had never before heard of Mali. What about you?

Would you have guessed the soil contains gold and that it once was a very rich country? It was when Mansa Musa was their King. He traveled with a long caravan of camels, loaded with gold, through the desert. All the way to Morocco to give gold to the King of Morocco.

It is not a rich country anymore. Most of the people hardly have any money. But they smile a lot and the sun shines every day!



Almost all the people in Mali have a dark skin. And they speak a different language. They love to wear beautiful clothes. Girls often have their hair braided with beads and the boys love to play soccer.

Just like us they like parties. They make music and dance. And often a meal is being served. The women cook for several days for a wedding party. Weddings often take place on Sundays. The streets will be filled

with lots of honking cars and motorbikes. And the party will take place in a street too. In a big party tent right in front of the family's door. Most of the houses are made of loam, a kind of brown mud. The walls are built of loam bricks and plastered, to smoothen the surface.

Did you know that a lot of explorers have traveled to Mali in the past? They went to search for Timbuktu. Yes, there really is a town called Timbuktu! It is in the desert. Over a 1,000 kilometers from Mali's capital. We won't be going there, but we'll go to Dogon Country. In Dogon Country they dance with masks when there is a party or special occasion. There are all kind of masks and all of them have a specific meaning. I'm very curious about those masks.

I want to go to Mali too!

In short

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Day to day itinerary

Day 1 (Friday): journey to Bamako

We'll be traveling by plane, one of the big ones, that can take a lot of people. All the way to Africa. It is a long journey and we'll have to get to the airport with our bags and suitcases before we can get on the plane. It is exciting!

Our guide and driver will pick us up from the airport in Bamako. That is Mali's capital. Together with them we'll go exploring. They speak the language and they know the way around. We'll be taken well care of, while we're in their country. And they will explain us a lot, so we'll learn about Mali and we'll do fun things too.

night in: Bamako

Day 2 (Saturday): Bamako - Siby

This morning we can get used to being in Mali a bit. We'll go visit the city, but before doing that we'll need to exchange money. Mali is part of the African Monetary Union and just like several other countries they use the Franc CFA. We'll get about 650 of these for one Euro. Mom and dad even got 10,000 CFA bills. We're really rich here!

Some people are looking at us. They do not see white children every day. So they are just as curious as we are. Their eyes are dark brown and their hair is almost black. And their skin looks tougher than our's. Shall I dare to touch someone to see if that's true?

We'll be visiting the museum, because there's lots to learn about the country's culture. And the museum has a nice garden, with a playground.

We can eat our lunch in a restaurant in the garden.

After lunch we'll be driving to Siby. It's only about 50 kilometers. There are a lot of rocks around Siby. I'm looking forward to go there!

night in: Siby



Day 3 (Sunday): Siby and surroundings

Those rocks I mentioned yesterday, are really close. Today we'll be visiting one of them. It's a rock with a huge hole in it. It looks like a gate. People say it used to be a massive rock and that



someone shot a hole in it with a bow and arrow. I want to hear that story!

A bit further on there's a waterfall. A dust road is leading there and sometimes the road conditions are very bad. I hope we'll be able to get there today and have a picnic lunch at the falls.

And if we cannot get there, we'll ask the guide to take us to a cave. I've heard of a cave where water is leaking from the rock. Nobody knows

where the water comes from. People even climb to this cave with empty water bottles to fill them at this source.

night in: Siby

Day 4 (Monday): Siby - Ségou

Today we'll travel to Ségou. It's a city at the Niger river. De Niger is the longest river in Africa and only the Malian part is already more than a 1,000 kilometers. In Ségou they are very happy with the river. Water is very important in Mali, because the rain only falls during a couple of months every year. To grow rice and vegetables they use water from the river.

There are a lot of activities at the waterfront. People wash their clothes and the dishes. Not everybody has a tap at home. And tap water is a bit expensive. A lot of water is needed for all the washing, so they prefer to use the water from the river. And the women love to meet and chat too.

We'll be driving over 300 kilometers today. We're lucky because the road from Bamako to Ségou is like new. The landscape is different from at home. I see trees I had never seen before, such as the monkey bread tree. It's called a baobab here. It looks like its roots grow up into the air.

Long ago, before Mali existed, there was a Bambara Kingdom. It was a large Kingdom with different borders than Mali has nowadays. Ségou used to be the capital of that Kingdom. The Ségou of the past is what is now called Segoukoro and it is close to Ségou. The last of the Bambara Kings is buried in Segoukoro. If we are in time, we can maybe visit Segoukoro before arriving in Ségou. In Ségou we'll be visiting the market. It's held every Monday. People from surrounding villages come into town. You'll see women carrying baskets on their heads and donkey carts and motor taxis are all around. The market takes place on the river quay. People from the villages on the other side of the river come by boat. Such as the women of the pottery villages. To sell the pots they made.

There is so much to see on the market. The smell is different at home.

There's a section where dried fish is being sold and lots of women sell vegetables. But also pieces of soap, plastic buckets and all kinds of herbs.

Ségou has bogolan workshops. That is where cotton fabric is being woven and decorated with paints made of leaves and tree bark. And they also use mud from the river. If we go visit one of these workshops, we can even make our own bogolan painting.

night in: Ségou



Day 5 (Tuesday): Ségou and surroundings

We'll be spending the day in Ségou, where we'll do several things. And we can swim in the hotel's swimming pool.



In the morning we'll visit a hamlet. There is not even a shop. The people in this very small village make drawings on calabashes. The men and women use fire to heat a piece of iron and when the iron is red-hot it's used to draw.

In the afternoon we'll be going to another village. It's one of the pottery villages on the other riverbank. We'll take a boat to go there and have a look to see how the pottery is made. It's all done by hand. And every one of the women works on their own courtyard. Some of them have a small building for their work.



Others work outside. There is no factory and there are no ovens. The women do work together, it is called a cooperation. Together they travel to the market and they have a storage room at the market. That's where they'll keep the pots that have not been sold. And they help each other when someone is ill. They do not have health insurance, and it is a bit expensive if you need to go to the hospital and need to take medication.

The sun will be setting by the time we return. All year round it is almost at the same time, between 6 and 7pm. That is when the colors of the air are very

pretty, especially from the water.

night in: Ségou

Day 6 (Wednesday): Ségou - Djenné

We'll continue our journey and travel to Djenné. It is a town on an island in the Bani river. We'll cross the river with the ferry. It is a bit of a long journey, about 400 kilometers. We can stop along the way if we want to eat or drink something. And when we see something interesting. And of course when we need to go to the washroom. We just ask our guide and driver to stop. They will be



happy to make sure we have a pleasant trip.

Djenné is a special town. All of their houses are made of loam. That is the kind of mud I told you about. They even have the largest building made of mud in the whole world. It is a mosque. A mosque is the church of the Muslims. Most people in Mali are Muslims, and that is why you see a lot of mosques in the country.

There are Christians too, so you will also see a church in some places.

Djenné has become really famous because of all the mud buildings. And because of the plastering of the mosque. It is done every year! Almost everyone in town

helps with it. The boys carry the loam in baskets on their heads, the girls carry buckets of water.

Also on their heads. The men make huge ladders and do the plastering, and in the meantime the women cook at home. And when all the work is done, they'll eat and celebrate together. Only Muslims are allowed to enter the mosque. A part of the building is for the women and most of it for the men. If you are not a Muslim you cannot enter the building. But the outside of the building is really beautiful too!

night in: Djenné

Day 7 (Thursday): Djenné and surroundings

In this part of Mali you will see less donkeys than in Ségou. Carts are pulled by horses in this area.



And we are going to make a tour on a horse cart. It's a bit bumpy, because the soil is hard and with bumps and holes. There are no asphalt roads to get to the villages, and that is where we are going. We'll be visiting one or maybe even two villages. They are inhabited by different population groups, such as the Fulani and the Bozo.

The Fulani are herders. They take care of the cows, sheep and goats. The women sell the milk, which they carry in big calabashes on their heads.

The Fulani people often have a more narrow face than other ethnic groups, and high cheekbones. And often they have a few stripes next to their eyes. It is like a tattoo. And many Fulani women have a dark tattoo around their mouth. It shows if they are engaged or married. The Bozo are fishermen. Their villages are always on the waterfront. Every early morning and late afternoon they'll set out on the river in their boats. Experienced fishermen even set out alone. They stand on the boat and push it forward with a large stick while they throw out the nets or pull them into the boat.

night in: Djenné

Day 8 (Friday): Djenné - Mopti

We are going on a boat trip. It's one of these wooden boats with a thatched roof. Like the one that took us from Ségou to the pottery village. But today we'll be traveling much further. All the way to Mopti, almost 100 kilometers. Along the way we'll be visiting villages and we can watch the birds.



You may even see canaries and parrots flying around. Or we can take a nap on one of benches.

The boatsman and his assistant will cook us a nice meal. They'll be preparing it in the boat. I'm curious what they'll serve us.

Mopti, that's where we are going to, is also called the Venice of Mali.

That is because the Bani and the Niger river meet in Mopti and it has a busy harbour. From Mopti you can even take a boat to Timbuktu. That's a long journey, over 600 kilometers and it takes several days. Maybe we can see the boats who'll be going to Timbuktu in the harbour. They are always fully loaded. With lots of bags and sacs, and people, bicycles and cattle on top of them. I'm glad we are not loaded like that. Our boat even has a toilet.

night in: Mopti

Day 9 (Saturday): Mopti - Dogon Country

When we arrived in Mopti yesterday, our driver was waiting for us at the harbour to take us to the hotel. Today we have the morning off. Our guide and driver are not far away. And if we want to, we can do a city tour with them.

In the afternoon we'll continue to Dogon Country. It is a part of Mali along a cliff. On top of the



cliff and in the valley you'll see villages. And if you take a good look, you will even see houses in the cliff. These are ancient cliff houses and the Tellem people used to live there long ago. The Tellem people were small, kind of like Pygmies. Nobody knows how they entered their houses and some people say that maybe they could fly. There are caves in the cliff too. These are used as a cemetery. It is hard to get there. These caves are

sacred and we are not allowed to visit them.

In the past all the Dogon people were animist. Now there are a lot of Muslims and Christians too. In almost every Dogon village you'll see mud mosques. Not as big as in Djenné though. In some villages you'll see a church. And some people are Muslim and animist at the same time.

The animists offer to the ancestors and perform rituals for them. They do not have churches, but they do have sacred places, where only initiates are allowed. If someone else steps onto a sacred place, it brings bad luck to the village. They will then have to make sacrifices to make sure no bad things will happen to the village. That costs a lot of money. We'll be listening well to our guide and will stay near him, just to make sure we won't accidentally enter a sacred space.

In the afternoon we'll be visiting a village where they have rock paintings. Music instruments are stored in a cave. It is a place where the boys from the village are being thought about men-things by the village elders. And also about how a good man behaves and takes care of his family.

After having seen that village, we travel deeper into Dogon Country.

Tonight we will be sleeping in a camp. Maybe we can sleep outside or even

on the rooftop. And watch the stars. You can see them clearly here, because there are no lights.

night in: Dogon Country



Day 10 (Sunday): Dogon Country*

We were woken up by the sound as if someone was knocking on wood. The women of the village



had started the preparations for breakfast. It's a kind of porridge and it is called crème de miel. Miel is the French word for millet, a kind of cereal. The grains are being pounded. They do not have a mill to do that, so it is done by hand.

They use a mortar and pounder. It looks like a wooden bucket and a large stick. Those sticks are really heavy. The women must be strong! They even throw the pounder up in the air and clap their hands before they catch it and make it land in the mortar. Sometimes you can see as much as four women around one

mortar. And while they help each other they talk or sing. The girls help them too, before they go to school. And they go to the well to get water, because there are no taps in the villages.



To take a shower in Dogon you use a bucket of water and a bowl. With the bowl you take water from the bucket and pour it onto your body. Then you rub yourself with soap and rinse your body with bowls of water. It is not easy. Especially on your back and arms. But we can help each other!

Today we'll walk to another village and while we walk we can see the old houses in the cliff and the granaries and houses made of mud. Our guide explains about daily life in Dogon. It is very interesting.

In every village you can buy wooden sculptures. And masks. I told you about it. In the afternoon we are going to a village where they dance with masks. I hope they will be dancing for us too!

night in: Dogon



Day 11 (Monday): Dogon - San

It was very special in Dogon Country and with the masks. I will never forget about it! Did you know that boys start practicing on an early age to become a mask dancer? And that they all have their own mask? Some masks represent animals, and even girls. These are used by boys too, girls are not allowed to carry masks. Because long ago, a woman used a mask to scare her husband. And that is why it is still forbidden for women to carry masks.

I am feeling a bit sad that we are leaving Dogon Country already.

Today we'll go to San. The first big town we pass is Sévaré. It has a museum with lots of beads. Old beads too. We can see the beads and there are also have beads and necklaces for sale. Maybe for

mom or to take home for granny.

San is where we can take the road to the South of the country, but tonight we'll stay in San. In the afternoon we can make a walk through town if we like to.

night in: San

Day 12 (Tuesday): San - Sikasso

We travel further South, all the way to Sikasso. It is a bit far, but by now we have gotten used to the distances. Mali is a big country! And we are not even traveling through the entire country. It is great that our driver knows the way so well.

Do you know what is so cool about the part of Mali we will be visiting now? There are not a lot of tourists who go there. Tourists are people like us, who travel through a country to get to know it and to meet the people and learn about their lives and culture.

There are not a lot of tourists here, because not yet a lot of people know about all that you can see and do here. We do not mind at all. There will be more room for us to look around!

night in: Sikasso

Day 13 (Wednesday): Sikasso and surroundings

The roads in Sikasso are busy. We are not far from the border with Burkina Faso, another African country. And a lot of traffic coming from and going to that country goes through Sikasso. Also this part of Mali is very important for agriculture. Lots of vegetables and greens are being transported from Sikasso to other parts of the country.

There is a regional museum in town. You can see things from this region, such as clothes and old utensils and music instruments and a series of photos. The museum's caretaker explains everything. In the afternoon we'll be going to caves and rocks. It is only a small distance away. There is a cave mosque and we can climb all the way up. It is a bit steep, so we need to wear sturdy shoes and carry a torch. And no perfume for mom, because there are bees, who think there are flowers around when they smell perfume. People say that a big snake lives somewhere in a cave. We won't see it though. It is a sacred snake and it is well taken care of by the local people. Every week they make a sacrifice to the snake. Food for the snake, such as a chicken. And in return the snake talks to the ancestors and asks them to take well care of the people and the village. So you could say that the people take care of the snake and the snake takes care of them. Isn't that good?!



night in: Sikasso

Day 14 (Thursday): Sikasso - Sélingué



We'll once again be driving a couple of hours. We're going to Sélingué. It is a village near a big lake. It is a reservoir. The dam is a hydro-electric power station. The water is being used to create electricity and thanks to that a lot of villages are now connected to the electricity grid.

There is a nice hotel right at the lake. We'll be staying in bungalows. It has a pool and a restaurant over the water. Really a cool place to spend our

last couple of days in Mali.

night in: Sélingué

Day 15 (Friday): Sélingué and surroundings

Do you remember that I told you about the King, who traveled all the way through the desert to Morocco with a caravan of camels, loaded with gold?

And that Mali used to be a very rich country in these times? Well, Mansa Musa did not give all of the country's gold away. There is still gold in Mali. And not far from here is a place where gold is being dug. Shall we go and try to find the gold diggers?

In the afternoon we can have a nice swim. We can walk around a bit in the village. Or maybe we can set out on the lake with a local fisherman in his wooden boat and dream about all that we have seen and done during our trip through Mali.

night in: Sélingué



Day 16 (Saturday): Sélingué - Bamako - departure

When we arrived in Mali I thought it would be a long journey and now it's the last day already. We'll be packing our bags and if some space is left we can maybe buy some souvenirs when we are back in Bamako. There are handicraft markets with lots of nice handicrafts. Tonight we'll be transferred to the airport. Then time has come to say goodbye to our guide and driver. We're going home.

night in: -

Day 17 (Sunday): home coming

The plane has landed. We are almost home. Soon we can tell our friends about all that we have seen and done.

Maybe I can do a talk on Mali at school!

** Dogon Country can be visited by car or by feet; the route will be adjusted likewise.*