

Talking Timbuktu

Very early in my travels my mother gave me a St. Christopher medallion. My mother had a very complicated relationship with God involving anger and denial but she still felt this would do me good. My mother also had a very complicated relationship with me so she wasn't surprised that I wouldn't wear it, but as a compromise I said I would carry it with me in my travel wallet.

That was twenty years ago and it's still there. It lives in the little zip pocket at the front with assorted foreign coins. I can't tell my mother this now, but it's seen me through my three near-death experiences: near drowning on an island in the Bengal estuary, electric shock in a Ugandan shower, collision with a charging camel in Niger. From the first it is tarnished and I never cleaned it.

The travel wallet in which it lives is another relic. I bought it for my second ever trip, to Honduras's Mosquito Coast. I needed to get equipped and I bought that, a lightweight sleeping roll and hiking trousers in the camping shop, making sure the staff knew exactly where I was going. The wallet has been with me on every trip since. I learnt from my travelling colleagues that one needs a system to make sure you have all the vital basics – passport, yellow fever certificate, insurance contact details, air ticket, currency, credit cards, St Christopher. When I say wallet it's more of a bumbag, though too big to hang round one's bum or stomach. It's about the size of a CD and made of bluish cordura. It's all saggy from the amount of paper, coinage and currency I've stuffed in it. The main zip has gone, but when folded it works like a billfold.

These things provide a continuity and a connection, both to past and my present. They are my travel companions and rather like sliding into a sleeping bag under a mosquito net with a maglite torch, putting some music on the personal stereo and reading a book at the end of the day they give some connection to my world when I'm very far away from it . . . for example in Timbuktu.

The 'Guardian' travel pages for Saturday November 6th, 1999 contain an article about the journey of three charity workers to that mythical desert city, which opens up with *'I grew up with this image of Timbuktu as a magical quasi-real city on the edge of the earth. In fact, I wasn't convinced that it existed'*. It does, and one of the three charity workers was me. A photo with the article shows a local kid trying out my video camera. We wanted to experiment with another way of connecting our world of the West with a very different world.

The picture includes my face in profile. I look much younger then. I was; and also things changed. We were on the brink of the millennium then. I'd been working that year on the Jubilee 2000 'Drop the Debt' campaign. I'd been in Zambia and Uganda on other projects before this trip. Our original purpose was to film an irrigation project downriver from Timbuktu for a programme about access to water; but our project leader had said 'if we're going there, why not go to Timbuktu?' and this had led me in turn to say 'if we're doing that why not try to connect our audience to this remote world'. Life moved fast. What the me in that picture didn't know was that before the century turned my mother would be dead.

Our relationship was complicated. We were both obsessive and driven, with the complication that she was confined to a wheelchair and had been for much of my life. So when she died unexpectedly after a two-week illness just days before Christmas it was never going to be simple. Next Easter I was filming for two weeks in Sri Lanka and there were long van journeys into the hills and downtime in the old colonial hotel on Colombo's Galle Face which gave me time to shut myself off with music, think, and write letters to my dead mother. When I got back I'd put the loss into some kind of place, though its echoes reverberated down the subsequent years.

When we went to Timbuktu none of this had happened. What we were about to do seemed important and significant. We wanted to make a connection and at this time of febrile 'fin de siecle' pre-millennial excitement we were embracing the new possibilities of the internet. It was a time when Amazon, already describing itself as 'the world's biggest bookstore' was a year from even making a profit. While the apocalyptic predictions of aircraft falling out of the air at midnight because of the 'millennium bug' filled the headlines and while the dot-com bubble was starting to burst we were going to create our very own 'weblog'. It was a name we'd invented . . . or thought we'd invented . . . to describe posting a daily journal on web pages during our journey. We wanted to invite readers, as the Guardian article writer said, to take *'a virtual voyage on the internet, following the daily progress of the team to Timbuktu and an equally remote town called Dire'*.

We hadn't invented the name. We didn't know at the time and I just consulted Wikipedia to find out when weblogs . . . or 'blogs' . . . were invented. According to this, another internet phenomenon, the first blog was publicly aired in May of the same year. So we weren't far off. This was a search for a new way of connecting; and as well as nearly inventing the blog we were pushing the boundaries of the internet before broadband had even come along. (Wikipedia again; the first commercial broadband: 2000). To reach out into the internet's spreading tendrils from Mali we couldn't make use of wifi (just launched that July) or even mobile phones, which didn't reach those remote areas. We used a satphone lent to us by the aid agency we were working for, who used them for remote humanitarian operations. We beamed our pages at painfully slow speeds to the stars. We hoped there would be people waiting to download and read them because the Guardian newspaper was to publish an article featuring and promoting the project while it was under way. We were pioneering internet adventurers, making new and dramatic connections. Less than two months later all this adventure and innovation had crumpled for me in the face of my personal disconnection.

That was yet to come. Now, we were in a light aircraft flying out into the desert towards Timbuktu from Mali's capital, Bamako; following the course of the Niger. The fat brown river oozed through a surrounding margin of green scrub with limitless desert beyond. We were to land en route at the desert town of Niafunke. There was a connection here, we were into world music and renowned Malian musician Ali Farka Toure, the first to find fame in the west through his album 'Talking Timbuktu' – made with Ry Cooder – had just recorded an album named after, and recorded in this his home town. We weren't about to meet Ali in Niafunke, we were just dropping off a consignment of roof tiles and toilet rolls for missionaries based there before continuing on to Timbuktu. The cover of the album shows

him recording in a bare brick room, I guess at his home. I put it on just now by streaming it from my iPhone. Strange connections.

The act of travelling to Timbuktu was everything I imagined it would be. At the end of the sequence of international airports, taxis in the teeming West African capital and light aircraft flights into the desert we were deposited on the sandblown airstrip at the edge of town, taken to the 'Hotel Bouctou' by pickup and left to roam the city of low sandstone buildings peopled by locals dressed mainly in black and white, and roaming Tuareg in their striking maroon and purple.

In the courtyard of the hotel, a sandstone brick guesthouse, late one evening I am watching a page slowly upload via the satphone. The sky is filled with stars and I need to be out there so the satphone can see them. Around my feet in the courtyard and on the floor of my room fat frogs are hopping around. They don't seem like natural desert inhabitants but there they are. We'd been gathering pictures, stories, and videos and publishing the first pages of our weblog. Richard the photographer's story of connection is recorded in the Guardian article. We'd been selecting pictures on his laptop for the upload, sitting outside a bar. I remember Tuareg nomads gathering round us. *'There were 20 people around me . . . Beforehand they had been trying to sell us daggers. We were just tourists. But when they saw the pictures, we made a human connection and we weren't tourists anymore.'*

If not tourists, what were we? Richard certainly didn't want to be a tourist and neither did I. We were both in it for the sake of change. For us the disparity between a world where the complexities of computers and their potential to bring down transport and banking systems because they couldn't count up to 2000 (the theory of the millennium bug) was a headline contrasted starkly with this sleepy forgotten city where the practical purpose of our filming, further downriver at Dire, was to show a small-scale irrigation project enabling ten families to grow enough food to live on. We wanted to make connections which would bring this world to life for that other, rich world. We wanted to add weight to the challenges set by the 'Jubilee 2000' campaign, to make the world more equitable.

I already saw there was a much deeper connection needed; not just to hear about, but to hear from. We weren't going to achieve that on this trip. It was first base. The article reported me saying *'I think for the travel audience, the voyage triggers them to want to go and see places like that, and to have an interest in the people, rather than just doing the sites. For the geeks, it diverts them from the wonderful technical wizardry of the internet and makes them look at the people. For the interested, development audience, it's a new way of bringing information to them. It helps them meet the people.'*

And what of Timbuktu, and the other places and people we encountered? I'd read that year's edition of the Rough Guide: *' . . . any illusions of grandeur you harbour are bound to be frustrated. As long ago as 1828 (French adventurer) Rene Caillie wrote 'I found it neither as big or as populated I had expected. Everything was enveloped in a great sadness.'* I wanted to take issue with the Rough Guide, which in the end is written for the tourists who do the sites. Physically it felt remote, disconnected from the other world, set in its own distant story. It retained the mythical magic. Yes it had a sadness to it. The fabled university and trading centre of the fourteenth century long gone. In those times hundreds of

thousands lived and studied here and precious salt mined and cut from the hills away beyond the dunes was traded for equal volumes of gold. I doubt the locals thought about this on a daily basis but got on with life and survival in a city like many others spread across West Africa. I struggle to bring that visit to life now (and the web pages are long gone; electronic ephemera) and when I try to think why it is because of the striking lack of connection. On nearly every trip before and since there has been a local connection, local stories, local understanding. Some kind of contact. Here, despite Richard's claim, we were by and large development tourists. The missing link was people. We needed to meet people to make the connection and in this town we were disconnected.

So we left. Though geographically disconnected it wasn't as disconnected, for better or for worse, as it appeared. That summer an unseasonal flash flood had gouged out the main street and demolished 150 houses. It was an extreme weather event and as I travelled I was seeing more of these. Abnormally warm seas destroying the shrimp farms on Ecuador's coast. Abnormally dry weather leading to forest fires and perpetual smog in Thailand. For all except the climate-deniers, climate change was on the march and distant, isolated Timbuktu wasn't immune to it.

Timbuktu's Djinguereber mosque built from mud in the 12th century, standing low and ominous with timber beams projecting from its walls like a porcupine, was not immune to the wider world either. Emerging Islamic State terrorists swept into the city years later, in 2012, and started hacking at this and the other mosques in the city in a confusing case of Islam on Islam violence. For a year the inhabitants lived under Islamist rule before French and Malian troops re-took the city. So yes, there are connections, but not in many cases to the benefit of the local people of the town.

As we travelled onwards to Dire we documented the connections we made. As another touristic act we headed downstream from Timbuktu towards Dire on one of the regular timber built trading boats carrying goods, people and cattle. Women gathered round a fire burning in the centre of the boat to cook and we wondered how an open fire on a wooden boat worked, but it did. They similarly wondered what we were doing with our laptop and satphone, and in the end the only explanation we could offer which made sense to them was 'Nous parlons aux étoiles' – we talk to the stars.

We sailed across the Niger from Dire on a gaff rigged boat whose sail was made from grain sacks stencilled 'Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations' to visit the irrigation and agriculture project. In a bit of downtime we found a music shack in the town with a beat-up speaker outside beaming music into the marketplace. Its stock was second hand cassettes, some so well used that they were ground down to a matte surface like well-travelled coke bottles. The proprietor obligingly put on Ali Farka Toure, Tomani Diabate, Baba Maal and other West African stars whose music had ridden the world music wave to the west. I lay in the marketplace with my head on a large dried gourd listening, the locals laughed at me and I laughed back.

Our route back to the capital was by a scheduled internal flight from an airstrip at Goundam in the desert way outside the town. Scheduled, but very late the twinprop arrived. It was Russian and when they got out so were the pilots. Mike was multilingual and could talk to

them. He found out that they were from the remote sub-arctic city of Archangel, and the plane itself had survived the war in neighbouring Sierra Leone before being put onto passenger duties. There were still bullet-holes in the fuselage.

Our round trip brought us back out of the desert, away from that remote world, to the buzz and busyness of Bamako. Journey's end, and we signed off the weblog, bought a few more world music CDs in airport departures at the airport and flew home. Looking at the site statistics the weblog had scored a few hundred hits. A small spike after the Guardian article. Not many visitors really. Am I allowed a cliché? – to say that the image captured in the article's photo, the Malian lad trying out my camera ; the Tuareg surrounding Richard's laptop, the banter about talking to the stars on the trading boat, the amused locals by the music shack in Dire, the dislocated Russian pilots at Goundam ; these were the connections. Slight and transient.

Meanwhile the ways the world has touched Timbuktu before and since – a place so remote yet exposed to global forces – these are the disturbing connections which affect peoples' lives. We work and even fight to make our way through life but external forces can change everything. The western world's addiction to energy changes the climate which changes weather patterns and triggers extreme weather events which touch the lives of people in places as remote as Timbuktu. Political forces trigger terrorism and extremism which reach their tentacles out to these places. My own life was about to be unexpectedly and dramatically affected by my own loss. I am not just a watcher and neither do I want to be. If I was going to do this stuff I wanted to help people to make connections. We played with the potential of the internet when the social media boom was still years away. Facebook didn't surface 'til 2004. We didn't make much of a connection with our Weblog in 1999, and I don't see signs that the internet is connecting people now in a meaningful and equitable way. Most of all the connections I was looking for, and am still, are to allow people to have a voice, to have a say and to have an influence on the world, rather than just it on them.

A final footnote. Timbuktu is iconically remote and inaccessible and in our globalised world we want, I think, to have a sense of diversity and mystery to balance the world brands – Coke, Macdonalds, Sony, Toyota, Apple and all the rest of it. The irony is that those globalising forces are gradually bringing everywhere closer and making everywhere more the same.

