LETTER FROM TIMBUKTU

Camel caravans fading from salt trade as Timbuktu slowly modernizes

Camel caravans have for centuries ferried salt to remote Timbuktu. But they are now gradually being replaced by a more modern beast. (Karin Brulliard/the Washington Post)

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TIMBUKTU, MALI -- The glittering slabs of white salt had been brought here across more than 400 miles of Sahara, as they always have. Al-Hussein Boubakar, their purveyor, was haggling with a customer, as he always does.

But the grunting camels Boubakar used for 35 years to ferry salt from Mali's northern mines to this remote town were gone. This year, the trader's 320 slabs arrived in Timbuktu on a rumbling, German-made truck. It was a castoff from the Algerian military, but it was new to Boubakar, and it had cut his journey from three weeks to two days.

For centuries, camel caravans have sauntered into this town during the cool months, loaded with large, rectangular blocks of one of the desert's few resources: salt. It is mined from a dry lake bed in the northern village of Taoudenni and brought south by vendors who navigate by dunes and stars.

The ancient trade is not disappearing, but it is changing. And the gradual substitution of trucks for camels is just one evolution taking place in Timbuktu and the desert that surrounds it, extending north like an infinite ocean.

Out there, along with miners and traders, there are now al-Qaeda-linked insurgents in 4x4s.

In town, many homes are still tents or straw-and-mud structures, their floors spread with sand carried in on donkeys -- residents say it keeps the interiors cooler. At one house, the children of Hamma Ould Mahmoud, the wizened imam of a small neighborhood mosque, study Koran verses written in ink on smooth wooden boards.

But the sand on the floor of Mahmoud's front room rises to a peak in one corner, where a small table holds a dusty television, its cord snaking through the sand to a wall socket. In Timbuktu's labyrinthine old quarter, the motorbikes that have proliferated in the past couple of years zip past clusters of sheep.

And then there is this, said Abderrahmane Ben Essayouti, holding up his Samsung cellphone. Essayouti is the imam of a mosque built in 1327, Timbuktu's oldest. A recent rise in the number of religious schools in the town has stimulated faith, he said, and a rise in the use of cellphones has fueled trickery.

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"This is more dangerous than anything!" Essayouti said of the phone. It can take a man's time, he fretted, and his wife: What better way to quietly plan a rendezvous?

Not long ago, Essayouti received a call on his cellphone from a man who said that the imam had given him a blessing and that he wanted to repay the favor with a Mitsubishi Pajero. Essayouti simply needed to come to Bamako, Mali's capital, and pay about $650 for shipping. The imam called a friend, a police colonel, who met with and handcuffed the swindler. At the meeting spot, Essayouti said, were religious leaders from across Mali, more gullible than he.

"All the imams were there, waiting for their Pajero!" Essayouti recounted, before shuffling off to lead afternoon prayers.

Out in the dunes on Timbuktu's western edge, Salah Ould Youba sat with his camels as the call to prayer sounded from minarets. The team had arrived the night before -- traders and 60 camels laden with 300 salt slabs weighing 110 pounds each.

Youba, 35, had bought the salt three weeks before for less than $5 a slab and sold it here for three times as much. His sun-weathered face, the texture of a worn baseball mitt, betrayed exhaustion.

Camels are good for caravans only until they are about 6 years old, Youba said. Their teeth weaken after that, making it difficult for them to eat desert foliage and increasing their risk of starvation.

Still, he said, they are better than trucks, which require expensive fuel. Camels require leaves and water, which are free. That means that when traders return north -- their camels now carrying staples such as millet, rice and sugar -- they can afford to give some to the miners, who have the backbreaking job of hacking out salt under the blazing sun.

"It's better with a camel," he said. "I do not want to lose the tradition of my father and my grandfathers."

A few blocks away, Boubakar, 56, watched as his customer finished loading 10 slabs into a Toyota pickup and sped off to sell the salt in Mopti, a city even farther from the desert.

The "bad memory" of a 1973 drought was seared in his mind, Boubakar said, making him fearful of relying on camels that needed water and plants. With the truck, he said, he can make two trips a month, while camel caravans make two a year.

But he acknowledged that the costs meant his donations to the miners had ended.

"It is possible to do that with camels. With the truck, it is another way," he said, waving his hand dismissively as he watched his patrons unload salt from the truck bed. "There is nothing for the miners."

There were also other adjustments, Boubakar said. From the cab of a truck, the stars are obscured, and navigating is not the same. And so he had a request for a visitor.

"When you come back, whether in one month or five years," he said, "please bring me a GPS."