

By Ihab Zaki (January'2021)

On January 20th, we began our exploration trip to a seldom-visited nation: Niger. My group consisted of 10 intrepid travelers who, driven to desperation by their long grounding at home since last March due to the Covid-19, jumped at the occasion to take off and resume their travels. Although not having had their vaccines yet, they readily accepted the relatively *small risk* involved by their exposure at airports and sitting on planes, besides of course, accepting the unknown challenges that might arise in a pioneering trip to discover a foreign land of which we don't know much about first hand---all of which shows the extent of the hunger for freedom! As should be, I must begin by first expressing my gratitude to each and every member of this pioneering group that joined me on this tour. Eight of them have traveled with us for many years and some of whom I have even personally joined on several past tours, so it felt good to reunite in a spirit akin to that of a family gathering, bound together by our shared wanderlust. It was a truly heart-warming experience for us all.

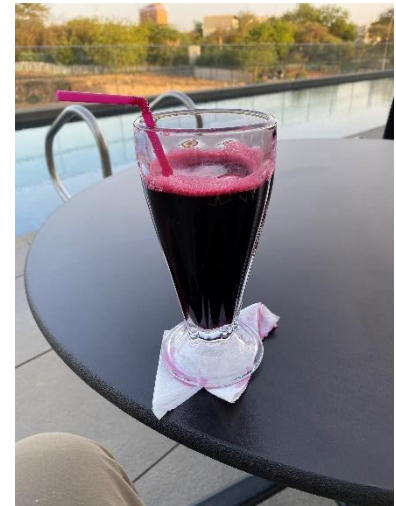
Getting to Niger went smoothly from the very start. After being granted the Niger Visa so easily and so swiftly within a week, the biggest challenge was to ensure that all of us got our PCR tests on the exact perfect day and time, to allow sufficient period to get the results before we depart and be still valid for our connecting flights and for our arrival in Niamey. Those regulations of test validity of 72 hours are the most critical in today's travel world. The one thing that can be a bit of a nuisance is this mask that we had to wear for almost 24 hours uninterrupted except for the few short breaks to eat and drink, whether in airports or on planes. Delta and Air France both insisted the only allowable masks are the KN95 or the disposable blue



surgical one that we wear a lot at home. My PCR result got checked to board from Detroit to Atlanta and then again to Paris and finally again to leave for Niamey. Everything was on time, the food on all planes was carefully presented in safe fashion and a pattern of middle empty seats was an assuring sign that the airlines sought to allow some social distancing. To our surprise Niamey's brand new airport was quite a surprise. Built by a Turkish company and spectacularly designed to largely mimic Istanbul's airport, but on a smaller scale of course, it had just been inaugurated only few months ago, and was a pleasure to go through it. The lines at the checking desks moved quickly, and the appropriate distancing was respected, the sanitizers were everywhere, and we were whisked in like a breeze. We were then happily driven to our luxurious hotel, which was going to be our home for the next three consecutive nights. After a briefing on security and protocols and what to expect in the Niger experience, followed by a meeting with our guides, we all shared a drink on the terrace in a balmy gorgeous 85-degree dry temperature, and then turned in to bed for an early sleep.

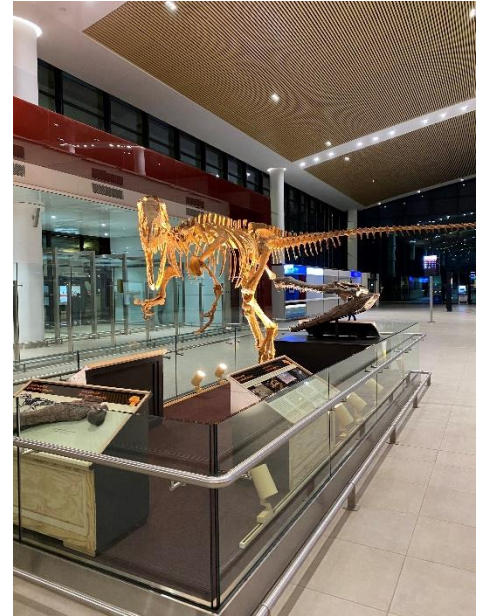
Our first day was planned on an easy restful schedule: beginning with a late start we went to take a traditional skinny long wooden boat (which they call pinasse or pirogue), so iconic on the Niger River (Like the sailing Felucca boats that Egypt is famous for). Heading further and further along the river away from the crowded, noisy, dusty city, we found ourselves surrounded by beautiful vegetation, palm trees, mango groves and smaller gardens and orchards. We navigated near many pretty islands and passed several small fishing villages. Our captain took us to explore on foot his village where our group was *the* exciting event of the day (or possibly of the whole year) to the locals; the growing entourage of children and curious teens followed us everywhere, asking to be photographed with us then, with giggles and smiles, wanting to look at their pictures.

We went into their humble homes made of mud brick, saw their cherished tiny mosque, and looked at their gardens where they plant their vegetables. On our way along the river to the lunch spot, we were lucky to encounter a family of hippos who kept floating with their heads turned towards our boat making sure to protect their babies. That gave us a great picture opportunity of course. Lunch, under a huge mango tree at the banks of the river while listening to gentle African music, was a simple but very tasty meal: BBQ of beef skewers wonderfully marinated, next to French fries and sautéed vegetables, and ice cold Heineken beer to drink.

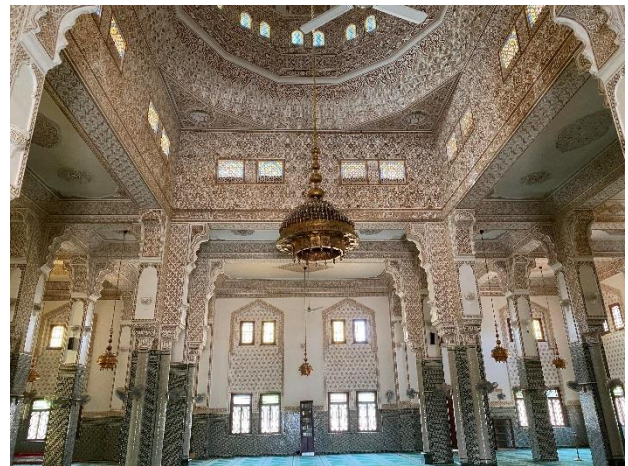


It was a delightful easy going first day when everyone was still a bit tired and jet lagged we drifted contentedly allowing our senses to absorb the unfolding new experiences.

Our second day was a bit busier as we had a few sites to cover in the capital city, Niamey, which emerged in the late 1800's as a small French town and has now developed into a sprawling city of about 3 million people. Niamey is your typical brownish colored, dusty, chaotic African capital with a few clustered high rises surrounded by vast expanses of mud brick homes and small shanty towns. We passed one of the largest and most imposing buildings that turned out to be the US embassy, which is considered to be one of the largest in Africa, the reason being that Niger is home to two of the largest US air bases on foreign soil. It is the hub of all anti-terrorism and surveillance missions covering the Sahel region. The drones that crisscross the skies of Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad and conduct missions against the Jihadists are launched from Niger. This explained why we saw several foreign troops and soldiers in a few places in town; they have a noticeable presence and they contribute a lot to the local economy.



Our visit of the National Museum was a bit surreal. The museum was originally a compound built by the French occupiers in the 1950's in the style of spread-out pavilions, each of which now concentrates on a particular feature of the country: Ethnography, flora and fauna, natural resources and ethnic clothing. Nowadays the museum complex also includes a pitiful looking small zoo where a few neglected looking animals are kept. The place was packed with locals and children who seeing us as a novelty in the place got distracted from the purpose of their visit and either curiously kept following us or approached to chat. A couple of the dinosaur skeletons are displayed in a shabby place and a cluster of shop keepers selling some touristy handicrafts is where a few in our group haggled with the vendors and eventually bought a few souvenirs. We learned in the museum that Niger is one of the largest producers of Uranium in the world and sadly because of the lower demand on that metal, many of the mines that employed so many and contributed so much to the country's GDP are now closed. We visited the grand Friday Mosque which was a donation from Libya's quixotic Qaddafi who at the time was offering every African Sub-Saharan nation a gift of their choice. Of some interest is that the majority of the recipient countries chose to get a mosque while Sudan, whose regime then was largely secular, chose to have a 5-star hotel (which today we actually use for our tours to Sudan). Qaddafi with his megalomaniacal persona--- who had at the time declared himself the King of Kings and the supreme spiritual ruler of Africa--- sought by this flamboyantly extravagant gesture to win the allegiance of African heads of state, and their recognition of his pre-eminence.



On that second day, we made our way to Kouré, a Nature Reserve, passing several villages and herders along the way. Here, we got to see some of West Africa's last giraffes in their natural habitat. It was incredible seeing these majestic creatures in the wild. A ranger drove us along the bumpy roads of the reserve as we tracked some herds, watching them wander around and munch on green vegetation; sometimes we got as close as 20 feet from them before they ran off.



After this interesting expedition we returned back to Niamey for a gastronomic dinner at **Le Pillier**, one of only two luxuries foreign owned/run restaurants in town, where we indulged ourselves on pastas and steaks and sipped beer and wine, as we laughingly recalled and commented on some of the quaint events of our day. We felt carefree and on an adventurous jaunt, away from cold weather (for many of us), and far, far removed from the ceaseless bombardment of the TV news and their seemingly frenzied anchors continuously assailing our ears with stories of disasters and the sad political mess that is currently roiling our country. It was hard to believe that we really were in the same world as that of our home country. We felt blessed to be in Africa, enjoying every minute of every day; and our enjoyment was no doubt accentuated by the sharp contrast with our previous extended isolation in our homes

Agadez stands without a rival as the showcase of Niger. The name alone stirs up feelings of mystery and brings to mind long forgotten stories and legends of ancient exotic kingdoms, oriental trading caravans and cities of fame for their learning centers of philosophy and Islamic theology. In terms of importance Agadez ranks on a par with other ancient fabled towns and kingdoms of West Africa such as Timbuktu in Mali and Chinguitty in Mauritania. Agadez was a major caravan town and a melting pot of traders, poets, dervishes, holy men, bandits and dreamers. In the 15th and 16th century it thrived and blossomed standing as it did along the route of the caravans carrying all sorts of goods crossing the great Sahara or caravans carrying Muslim pilgrims from West Africa heading to Mecca. It was a small mediaeval story of success, but like so many other such towns, it fell on bad times and shriveled when the caravans halted as the trade routes got interrupted by wars and marauding tribes, or by the moving sand of the Sahara engulfing part of the town and often causing blockage of water wells. The place is a reminder of the ethnic mix that passed through seeking wealth, or fame or knowledge or wisdom.

Our hotel was a peaceful oasis within the chaos of this modern town (or small city) of 200,000 inhabitants. Oddly, of all places in Africa Libya's Qaddafi, for heaven knows what reason, chose this location to build a resort-like compound in the local style of architecture. There Qaddafi hosted many dignitaries and official personalities that came to pay him tribute whenever he decided to spend time in Niger.

Our adventure in Agadez took us to the impressive 16th century mosque which rivals the one in Timbuktu and having exact similar architectural design that is very traditional in the Sahel region. It was flanked with the iconic towering minaret with wooden beams protruding from its sides at equal distances. Some of those beams are the original ones from 500 years ago and the ingenuity of it lies in that the beams allow the locals every year after the rainy season to climb on them to re-plaster the mud surface of the minaret. I ventured to climb inside to the top the



100 steps for a rewarding magical view from the top over the entire old section of the city. The passage was narrow, dusty and claustrophobic and indeed I paid the price for the following 2 days with tired leg muscles that wobbled and shook whenever I walked, but the view was worth every bit of pain!

The mystical town had a cob web of alleys and small passages lined with adobe one or 2 story high homes and several remarkable little gems such as a small mosque, a home of a wealthy merchant who completely decorated the interior with beautiful carvings (The Baker's house) and another one who had bull horns planted all around the house walls. I also had the great pleasure to visit the current Sultan of Agadez in his palace, built in the early 16th century (predating even the grand mosque). I was greeted in the inner hall which had all 4 walls covered with historic pictures of previous sultans and the current one. I was greeted by this imposing man all dressed up in a purple color typical Tuareg robe and white head wrap that covered his entire head but his eyes. It surely befitted the Covid era with him covering nose and mouth with his shawl and me with my dusty mask. I sat with him on his big sofa exchanging a wonderful dialogue as he explained to me what his mission is and his role to lead his people and combat terrorism and illegal human trade. The province of Agadez encompassing two thirds of the country size is the crossroad of the smugglers whisking their cargo of West Africans attempting to escape the harsh conditions of their countries and hoping to reach the Mediterranean coast to embark on dinky small boats and reach southern Europe). As you all know that statistically a very small percentage makes it there and the rest (by the hundred every month) die either in the Sahara crossing or drowning in the sea. So Agadez is the center for this unfortunate illegal human trafficking along with several other criminal activities, such as arms trade and drugs and gold; surely a very exciting and intriguing place.



Once out of the hustle and bustle of Agadez to start our 2 days' expedition to the remote and gorgeous oasis of Timia that is located amidst the Aiir Mountains our convoy of 5 rugged A/C 4x4 vehicles began its long trek in which we travelled for over 8 hours across an amazing variety of terrains. The road begins through a few small oases formed with some huts and mud-brick homes dotting a lush vegetation comprised of palm trees and fruit gardens, considered home for a variety of ethnic tribes that settled in the area. Then we slowly began the more arid portion of our trip with Jurassic-looking landscape covered with colossal boulders and smaller volcanic rocks of every size and shape and color (though black prevails). The scenery strongly called to mind museum images of the dinosaur era, and indeed as a matter of fact, Niger is one of the few African nations known for its abundance of fossilized Dinosaur fields. A paleontologist project from an Atlanta University has removed already over 15 full and complete skeletons



of some of those huge prehistoric beasts that inhabited the earth. A couple of them are housed in the Niamey Museum (very pitifully displayed), and one is exhibited (beautifully displayed) at the new airport that was recently opened in Niamey last year. We heard that there are still many more such relics embedded in various areas amidst rocks.

Beyond that volcanic landscape, we slowly climbed up a mountain range crawling at 20 miles/hour on dirt roads and gravel; causing us to traverse this short distance of 150 miles between Agadez and Timia the entire day! We passed many villages and while descending from the other side of the mountain chain, we began to witness more vegetation and the scenery changed once more like in a kaleidoscope! Our picnic lunch in a small village under a huge tree was a real treat: the crew planted our foldable chairs, set up a big table and began cooking vegetables. We feasted on fresh French bread with Italian cheeses and German salami washed down with some ice-cold Heineken beer. Then our lecturer Mohamed Halouani from Tunisia, with whom I have collaborated for over 20 years now, gave one of his animated and passionate talks about the mosaic of ethnicities that inhabit Niger.



On reaching Timia, we were happily surprised by the beautiful setting of our picturesque ochre-color lodge/inn nestled in the oasis and in its backdrop those majestic mountains displaying their myriad red and orange shades at sunset. At the inn each of us was given a simple room with its private bathroom, and were then ushered to the courtyard, the common area, where we were offered freshly squeezed juices from the fruits growing in the inn's own gardens. After getting our rooms for a brief rest we were treated to a typical grilled mouton on an open pit fire and coupled with the Champaign I got the group from the duty free shop, and the later musical performance by the Tuaregs with their traditional drumming and dancing this evening was filled with laughs and memories of a truly sublime part of the country. These are the memorable moments in travel that are almost impossible to convey in their true touching spirit to those who did not go through the experience themselves. At day's end we all retired for the night, pleasantly tired, happy and contented with the simple comfortable accommodations and a day well spent.



The next day in Timia was also filled with excitement and joy as we first headed out to climb a hill to explore the old French colonial fort; from there we were able to have a fantastic aerial view of the entire oasis nestled amidst the peaks around it. Upon descent, a leisurely walk in the labyrinthine alleys of the old section of the oasis with its mish-mash of houses gave our group a chance to interact with the locals, taking all sorts of pictures with colorful dressed women and curious impish children who of course managed to follow us--from a distance--all along the streets of the town's center. We surely have been a novelty for them! The inhabitants of this historic oasis are all Tuaregs (usually referred to as the Blue Men of the desert due to the distinctive color of their robes and turbans). Most of their homes are built of adobe, and due to the rainy season's damage that affect them every year the locals have to continuously re-plaster those buildings every year. One wonders at the effort expended to do this laborious task for centuries? If nothing else, it certainly reflects perseverance and an inherent strong attachment to one's traditional dwelling place.



Afterwards, the whole group accompanied our amazingly passionate local guide (Yaou) to the town's health central clinic where he was to schedule handing them a gift that he bought with his own money as a contribution to this society: a **top-of-the line microscope** which the clinic badly needed since theirs had been malfunctioning for over a year now. This relatively humble gift will help save many lives since the local community continues to struggle badly with Malaria, which is rampant during and after the rainy season of June-September, and leads to many deaths. The ceremonial donation though simple was deeply emotional to both donor and recipients and my group, causing the shedding of many tears. Our group, which could not help but be also touched by the scene and its humane significance, prompted many to make monetary donations to help fund the clinic's simple basic needs. Those kinds of moments are a major element in enriching the soul of travelers and experience has shown that they are events of lasting memory.



That same evening the group was invited to attend (in the space outside the lodge) another magical performance by Tuaregs called "**Fantasia**" which included camels and dances and music and chants. This extravaganza ended at sunset leaving the group mesmerized. Later we were treated to another feast, this time of couscous (like a Moroccan Tagine).



On our return to Agadez for another day after our Timia adventure, we visited the bustling live-stock market, a true photographer's delight. The place constituted of a cacophony of colors, noises, smells, sounds and we wandered learning about the various tribes and what animals they raise and bring to the market to barter with. A Fulani farmer with his cow comes to trade it for wooden bed and salt and perhaps tobacco leaves while a Tuareg exchanging his goat to get textiles or Chinese made machine. We encountered so many different people and on the way out we were gifted talismans made out of leather to protect us, give us health and wealth or sexual potency by an old man who was so entertaining to meet.

Our adventure to Niger was fast approaching its final phase. Eventually, like everything else in life, our sojourn in this colorful land drew to its end and we all went to our PCR test in Agadez, in preparation for our return trip back home in a few days. The hospital was humble but clean and quiet and the process was well organized and seamless and by night we received our printed negative test results that we all eagerly awaited and celebrated.



Each and every day in Niger brought with it a new thrill and a heightened excitement coupled with a pervasive sense of being adventurous explorers of virgin territory rather than merely foreign tourists.

Our 10 days' tour in this rather obscure and relatively poor country afforded us an opportunity of learning much about the different facets of a culture vastly different than our own but which yet had much to teach us about the unity of our collective humanity. It also bestowed upon us a magical sense and offered each of us an array of enriching experiences and emotions that are hard to describe on paper. It was a thrilling adventure out of which we all came out with a wealth of warm vivid memories that will long live with us and be a source of recharging our spirits as well as bring a smile to our face whenever we reminisce about Niger. With such a trove of riches the trip was a veritable blessing.



From a purely personal perspective I have an additional blessing for which to be thankful, for not only did I partake like my clients of the rich memorable experiences provided by the trip but the moments we shared together consolidated my bonding with them as one would feel among his broader clan.

Moreover, such firsthand experience is priceless since I learn the ins and outs of the destination in order to promote it more effectively and be able to answer more comprehensively any questions of future travelers about it.

My parting word: If you have not thought of Niger before, it's time to consider it now.



Call us on our toll free at
1-800-645-3233

Find the itineraries on our website at
<http://www.mideasttrvl.com>
Or request them via e-mail at info@mideasttrvl.com

Follow us: 
Facebook page: [Spiekermanntravel](#)