



→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

FESTIVAL OF THE NIGER

SÉGOU, MALI

Kevin Rushby samples the musical delights Mali has to offer at its festival on the historic West African Niger river

There is a moment at the start of the 2009 Malian Festival of the Niger when all the noise of introductions, greetings and crowds falls away, leaving just the song of the frogs in the river. And a little further off, there's the buzz of life around the shore: women washing clothes by the dug-out canoes, men landing their fish, travellers boarding boats to take them to outlying villages. The festival is well named because the river, one of Africa's geographical marvels, is very much part of things – the main stage even floats in it, and the audience sits on its banks, enjoying the cooler air that moves off the vast expanse of water.

The festival is in the town of Ségou, 235km north-east of the Malian capital of Bamako, a town with a vibrant riverside culture and some grand 19th century French colonial architecture. The festival is a much more recent phenomenon, starting in 2005, according to the organisers, as 'a complement to the Festival of the Desert'. With security problems surrounding the location of that great festival (the desert region of Mali has had problems with a Touareg insurrection and also violent Islamic extremism), many travellers

seem to have opted for the safer environs of Ségou. We certainly find it busy and very friendly. Arriving alongside the various musicians and fans are traders from all over West Africa, eager to make a few bucks for their craft goods. None are more glamorous than the Touareg – and don't they know it – swathed in blue scarves and telling tales of desert caravans over tiny glasses of thick,

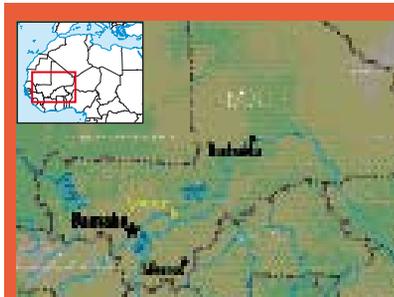
foaming tea. "The first cup is as bitter as death," says one, as I sit on his shop – a rug in the street. "The second mild as life, but the third... that is sweet like love. You like jewellery?"

Down at the main stage, after some interminable, self-indulgent speeches by local politicians and an overlong bit of theatre, the show actually kicks off with local heroes, Super Biton de Ségou. Thankfully, it takes about ten seconds for them to blast away the memory of that unfortunate start, and set the adoring crowd alight. Grannies waggle their bottoms, youths do a pump-jump dance, others just smile and sway. This opening set moves seamlessly into a song from Abdoulaye Diabaté, who does a major *griot* homage to local *ngoni* player, Bassekou Kouyaté. It's a complete joy to be there under the African stars, watching him rip notes from the *ngoni* with the effortless cool of a young Chuck Berry.

Bizarrely, in the middle of all this excitement, we also get a Mexican *marimba* band who manage to quieten the crowd, then irritate them by overstaying their welcome. There is only one stage in the evenings, so there's no escape from the occasional, and perhaps inevitable, low points.

The next day I wander around getting into some of the side-shows: an art display by sculptor Amahiguiré Dolo, then some Touareg drumming and dancing. Outside the festival area itself, there is a strange little market for herbalists and sorcerers: everything from dead parrots to dried bats. A visit to Ségou-Koro, the old town, also proves worthwhile for the remarkable mud architecture. This was as far as the Scottish explorer Mungo Park reached in 1796, after an epic struggle. These days it's a lovely 10km boat journey down from the new town to the old, taking care not to sail into the Fulani cattle that make the long swim across to fresher pastures.

In the evening the festival kicks off with



HOW TO GET THERE

- Several companies offer trips to Ségou, including the UK-based From Here 2 Timbuktu (www.fromhere2timbuktu.com) and Savane Tours, who are based in Mali (www.savanetours.com).
- Songlines Music Travel also offer a trip to the festival, see p17 for more details.



two female singers who are not so well known outside their home territory: first Haira Harby, whose brilliant set is followed by Adja Soumano, a real revelation and one of the festival highlights for me.

The all-female Les Amazones de Guinée then bound on-stage amid great expectations. Sadly, their music has all the charm and melody of several fingernails dragging down a blackboard during a migraine. Several people assure me they can be superb, so maybe it's just a bad night for them. I should have retired to a nearby bar, but the crowd is packed tight awaiting the next act, Babani Koné, who at least finishes the night on a high point.

Saturday is the big finale in Ségou, and the town is now brimming with locals, foreigners and excitement. Flat rooftops are being rented out as impromptu campsites, restaurants need

.....
“The first cup [of tea] is as bitter as death,” says a Touareg. “The second mild as life, but the third... that is sweet like love”

advance bookings, and musical instrument-vendors are selling out fast. Every dusty corner seems to have some tangle-haired youth making his first tentative noises from the ngoni, *tamani* drum or *kora*. Swept up in the musical fervour I buy a *balafon* – the xylophone with gourd sounding boxes hung below the wooden keys. The great thing about this instrument, I rationalise to myself, is that it sounds OK even in my inexpert hands. A quick demonstration from a member of local

band La Buze reminds me that it also sounds amazing when played correctly.

The big night gets underway with Vieux Farka Touré, who oozes the kind of star quality that his illustrious father possessed. Mamar Kasse from Niger keep up the frenetic pace set by Vieux, but then things slow a little for New York-based kora player, Mamadou Diabaté. By now the crowd is getting a bit too densely packed for me, so I move to the back. Not quite so good a view, but enough to enjoy the final act: Oumou Sangaré, arguably Mali's biggest star, hugely popular inside her own country as well as internationally. A stunning end to what has been a great festival. ●

DATES Next year's festival runs from January 30-February 8 2010

ONLINE www.festivalsegou.org/new

From left: the main stage flanked by the river Niger; Adja Soumano's performance was one of the highlights of the 2009 festival; the festival crowd; Adja Soumano's bassist on-stage in 2009



Festival-goers sporting sunglasses of their own creation

ITCHY FEET?

Songlines Music Travel has a new selection of trips for 2010, including the Festival of the Niger. See p17 for more details.

