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HD **The end of the road?**

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Adventure With little eulogy, a golden era of adventurous travel has come to an end. By Charlie English

Mark Twain extolled the mind-expanding benefits of travel in The Innocents Abroad , his account of an 1867 tour of Europe and the Holy Land. "Travel", he wrote, "is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

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Rarely have these words felt so relevant: now, surely, is a time to escape our little corners of the earth. And yet travel, in the Twain sense, is in many ways harder than it has been for a generation.

An example. At the age of 18, inspired by Tim Slessor's account of an overland expedition from London to Singapore in 1955, I developed the idea of driving from my hometown in Yorkshire to Timbuktu. I saved money, bought an old Land Rover and set out with a friend in the winter of 1987. We smoked weed, got robbed and mugged and broke down, but reached Algeria with enough money left to set off into the Sahara. The desert town of Aguelhok, in Mali, marked the end of our crossing, our summit, and once there we cast around for a new idea. What if we traded the clapped-out car for some camels and rode to Timbuktu? The story we would tell! We found a vendor, but as he only ever managed to produce one small specimen, we abandoned our plan and drove on. I sold the car in Gao, on the banks of the Niger, and travelled to Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire and then home.

This foolhardy African adventure spurred me on through what now looks like a halcyon time for independent travel, when the world was a safe, or safe-ish, place in which to wander. Each era, in its way, can lay claim to being a travel "golden age": in the 17th century it was the Grand Tour; two centuries later, well-to-do Victorians were venturing up the Nile and out towards the American west. Thesiger, Hillary and Tenzing could stake a claim for the postwar years, as the hippies could for the 1970s.

From where I sit, however, the late 1980s and early 1990s look pretty good too. This was when mass-market adventure travel began, when Lonely Planet and the Rough Guides boomed, fuelled by growing numbers of low-budget, ambitious gap-year students. I took full advantage, cycling around Nepal, running through China and Pakistan, and even, for a few heady moments, setting foot in Afghanistan. In 1989, two years after my visit to Mali, I drove to the Sahara again in a different vehicle, but it was too unreliable to risk the track to the country. Timbuktu once again remained tantalisingly out of reach.

It would be another 25 years before I finally reached the city. In 2014, Timbuktu's circumstances were very different. After a spate of kidnappings and conflicts, travellers had largely abandoned the Sahara.

The south of Mali, including the capital Bamako, lay under an orange Foreign Office travel advisory, which meant "don't go unless you have to", while the whole north of the country, including Timbuktu, was deep in the red "don't go here at all" zone.

Expats I spoke to in Bamako were forbidden by their governments from travelling north: one diplomat, a single man, went everywhere with six special-forces minders, even on dates. Travelling now as a journalist, I was told that the only safe way to reach Timbuktu was on a flight operated by the UN Humanitarian Air Service, but even then I had to sign a waiver acknowledging that the journey would take me into zones "of particular risk", and agree, in event of my death, that none of my dependants, heirs, successors, distant relatives or pets would ever hold the UN responsible.

When I reached Timbuktu, it was quietly impressive. I checked into Alhousseini Ag Tajoudine's place, the Auberge du Désert, the only hotel westerners were using, and stayed for a week. I kept my head down, travelling around by car, meeting people inside their homes, and at night wondering where I would hide if someone walked in with a gun.

Everything was fine, of course: as foreign correspondents say, it always is until something happens. Without exception, the people I met were glad to see me, since I represented the outside world, which, Timbuktiens felt, had forgotten them. The famous little caravan town has always loved visitors, and until recently they were a considerable source of income. The highlight of the tourist season in the 2000s was the Festival in the Desert, a showcase of Malian and international music organised by Manny Ansar. Eight or nine hundred foreigners would come, Ansar told me, and spend money all over town: "They paid for travel, they paid in the restaurants, they paid for souvenirs, they rented camels, tents." But the violence in the desert put a stop to that, and by the time of my visit Timbuktu was filled with unemployed tour guides, empty hotels, and its famous manuscript libraries were shut.

"Your visit means things are returning to normal," one woman, a recently returned refugee, told me. It wasn't true. Today Timbuktu still lies deep in the red zone, and in 2017 the Festival in the Desert remains in exile, as it has been since 2012.

The decline of Timbuktu's tourism is far from unique, as the traffic-light system used by government travel advisory websites neatly shows. It is now impossible to travel overland from the Mediterranean to the Sahel without entering territory marked red on Foreign Office maps, and Britain is no more especially cautious than most other western governments: at the time of writing, a travel advisory map on the Canadian government website reserves its green safety rating (meaning "exercise normal security precautions") for only a handful of countries beyond Europe and North America, and excludes France. Most of the rest of the planet is coloured yellow or red.

There is no mystery as to why most of the world is viewed by our governments as unsafe. A Foreign Office spokesperson draws my attention to a recent statement by Boris Johnson, the UK foreign secretary. The threat from terrorism was "evolving", Johnson told Parliament in December 2016. "Despite the pressure of military action in Syria and Iraq and concerted and sustained counter-terrorism action globally, the main terrorist groups . . . continue to pose a threat to UK interests globally, including British travellers."

Despite it being 15 years since George W Bush declared his "war on terror", in which hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, the attacks continue: at the time of Johnson's statement there had been more than 25 major terrorist attacks since 2012, which had resulted in the deaths of at least 300 tourists around the world, including 31 British nationals. (To put these figures in perspective, more than 3,600 Britons died abroad in 2015-16, most of them in Spain, Thailand, France, Switzerland, Cyprus, the US and Greece.)

As the threat levels have increased, our attitudes to risk have also changed. Mike James, operations director at Exodus Travel, began his career in the early 1990s as a 21-year-old working for Encounter Overland in the hub of adventure travel, Earl's Court Road in London. At that time, he recalls, it was a "rufty-tufty" business, with a relaxed attitude to security or breakdowns. "Vehicles would come in three or four weeks late," he says. "They would send a telex to the office saying, the engine's fallen off, what shall I do?" Somehow the drivers and mechanics would solve whatever they were faced with. "There were guys who could fix a truck with a shoelace and a welding torch in the middle of nowhere."

At that time, Exodus was one of the major overland companies, operating in Africa, Asia and South America. In those days, says James, people would do a one-off, four-month trans-Asia trip, then "go and get a proper job and have kids", and that would be that. But by the 1990s the market was changing, and the company sold off its trucks. Adventure for Exodus now means something different: "It's less about discovering a country and more about an activity - climbing a challenging mountain, or even cycling. Now people treat it more as a holiday." Exodus's most popular destinations used to be Nepal and the trans-Africa route; now it is Italy.

None of this means long-haul tourism numbers are down. Matt Phillips, Lonely Planet's sub-Saharan Africa editor, who caught the travel bug overlanding from South Africa to Morocco in 2001-02, says more people are now visiting Africa than they were in the 1990s, but they're choosing destinations carefully and flying in and out. "Because you have travel insurance that relies on government warnings, you follow the traffic light system and say, 'OK, where is green? Where can I explore?'," says Phillips. "You take it country by country."

He takes the advisories seriously, but also points out that people's perceptions of risk don't always tally with reality. The media focuses on acts of political violence, but a greater risk while travelling in most countries comes from road accidents. Another tendency is for a single high-profile crisis to tar an entire region: during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, Phillips heard of people cancelling trips to South Africa, Zambia and Kenya, countries that were further from the outbreak than London, Paris or Madrid.

Among the very few professionals happy to fly in the face of government advice is Geoff Hann, the 80-year-old owner of Hinterland Travel in Yorkshire. Hann - who made his first foreign trip in the 1970s when he drove his children overland to India "to try and sort out my troubled domestic life", as he puts it - has legendary status within the business for taking travellers to places no one else would attempt. When I speak to him, he has just taken a tour group to Iraq. He must be, I suggest, the Foreign Office's worst nightmare. "Well, yes, I am," he replies. "But I am very, very careful."

In his view, government advice reflects a growing caution in society: "Anyone who goes on my tours will tell you that their relatives don't want them to go," he says. "You can't do anything any more without somebody saying, 'Why are you doing that?' and criticising you for it." He uses local transportation companies and security personnel where necessary, and his long experience, he says, means that he often knows more about the situation on the ground than the diplomats, since "none of the people who work in the embassies in places like Afghanistan or Pakistan or Iraq are allowed out".

Even he recognises that the dangers of travel have increased, however. He blames politics but also technology, since the location of a tour group can now be reported widely by almost anyone. "You can be going through a remote part of central Afghanistan and look around and there's a man on his camel," he says, "sitting up there on his mobile, and you think, my God, what is the world coming to? And of course the real terrorists have access to computers, your website, your email, everything. If they are really intent on doing something nasty, they can do it." He tells his clients to refrain from posting their whereabouts on social media.

There is always a risk in travelling, he says, but he spells this out very clearly on his website, and believes that his customers - who are often mature people looking to fill a gap in their travel experience - have to take responsibility for their decision to visit the more dangerous destinations.

Surprisingly, given the time he has spent in trouble spots, Hann says he has suffered only one really bad experience, which occurred last summer when he was leading a tour of western Afghanistan. His group was travelling through Herat under the protection of Afghan government troops when they came under attack from Taliban fighters. Several people in his party were hit by shrapnel, but no one was killed and the Afghan forces, who had three armoured cars, eventually managed to fend off the attackers. Still, it was a highly traumatic incident. "I don't really like being shot at, I must admit, or being RPG'd, thank you very much," he says. "Luckily, fortunately, we all came out OK. We were very lucky indeed. It could have been a complete disaster, a wipeout."

He was sued and ordered to pay compensation, a decision that has placed his company in financial jeopardy and which he believes was wrong. He remains adamant that it is "totally unfair" to blame the tour operator if its clients are attacked. "You can say I took them there so therefore it is my fault. But they also have to take blame, since they chose to go there. They weren't compelled to go. I didn't tell them they were going to be 100 per cent safe, either. I never said any of that."

Will he continue to take people to Afghanistan? "I haven't really decided yet, I must admit," he says. But the tours of Iraq are going well. "The archaeology there is fantastic," he says.

'The Book Smugglers of Timbuktu', by Charlie English, is published by William Collins in the UK, and in US by Riverhead, under the title 'The Storied City'

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