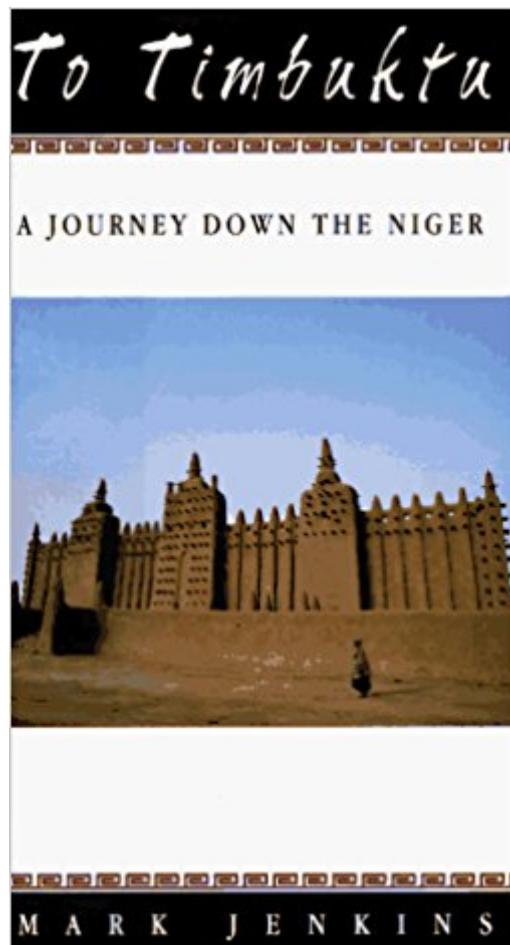


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To Timbuktu



Synopsis

Traveling with Mark Jenkins is a mixture of the daring and the dangerous, the dramatic and the absurd. Here, he and three friends, with the aid of a remarkably intuitive African guide, set out to attempt the first descent of the Niger River, the legendary city of Timbuktu their final goal. Along the way, they are attacked by killer bees, charged by hippos, stalked by crocodiles. They pass through villages where every female child has undergone a clitoridectomy, stumble upon a group of completely blind men living in the bush, dance with a hundred naked women. That Jenkins reaches his goal, riding alone across the Sahara on a motorcycle, stands in sharp contrast to what befell those who first tried to find Timbuktu and whose fates the author interweaves with the narrative of his own adventures.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Niger River in West Africa is 2500 miles long?longer than the Danube or the Volga. Jenkins, a writer for Backpacker who ran the Niger from its source to Timbuktu, offers here a first-person account of his journey. Starting from the source, he and a close friend and acquaintances kayak past crocodiles, hippos, and somnolent villages as they go from jungle to desert. The look at village life forms the most intriguing part of the book. Jenkins weaves in vignettes of early explorations of West Africa that are of some interest but might better have been used to offer more information about the people and places along the Niger. Still, he has spun an excellent travel yarn about an area little considered in the West. Recommended for public libraries.?David Schau, Kanawha Cty. P.L., Charleston, W. Va.Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Jenkins and his buddy, Mike, outdoorsmen and explorers from Wyoming with wanderlust in their blood, leave their wives back in the States (six months pregnant) for West Africa and the Niger River. With two companions, they set out to kayak from the source of the river to the sea, a feat never before accomplished; they intend to be guided by the specter and myth of Timbuktu. Interweaving his tale with the adventures of Mungo Park, Rene Caillie, and other explorers who paved the way, Jenkins portrays himself as a modern-day adventurer on a rapidly domesticated planet, a Zen Hemingway--macho yet sensitive, respectful yet indignant. He feels guilty about leaving his wife back home but is not willing to shorten his trip; he argues with a distinguished African chief regarding the ancient ritual of female circumcision. "Destiny is the coincidence of the random with the inevitable," he writes, waxing poetic with that familiar brand of road wisdom and traveler's koans. Jenkins evocatively conjures encounters with bees, crocodiles, hippos, waterfalls, corrupt officials, mercenaries, and soldiers. Benjamin Segedin

I went to high school and was on the swim team with the author so I knew the four major characters of this book. It was a compelling read and the photos took me back. Objectively, it was well written and the subject matter alone will keep your interest!

To Timbuktu by Mark Jenkins is an enjoyable and quick read, more adventure travel writing than anything though with some history and a little commentary woven through it. Essentially, the book is one main narrative interspersed with two other narratives. The heart of the book is the account of how the author and three of his friends reached the head of the Niger River in West Africa and were able to journey down its most dangerous sections in kayaks, starting where the river was barely large enough for their one-man boats, contending with rapids, waterfalls, debris in the water, wild currents, hippos, and crocodiles. This main narrative would break from time to time to follow one of two other narratives; either describing adventures the author and one of his friends on the current expedition had in Europe and mostly in Africa a number of years ago (fresh out of high school) or an account of the legion of (very unlucky) European explorers who tried to solve the questions of the source and even the direction the Niger River flowed as well as the location of the fabled city of Timbuktu. I really liked Jenkin's writing style as he was quite descriptive and very witty. I loved how he described in his story of himself and his friend Mike, bored with Europe, when they both decided to go to Africa. "It was a word from the boundlessness of childhood. Big and deep as the sky." Or how he described that there were only certain times in your life when you can do certain things,

such as to go out to see the world. If you waited too long to go, "the seeds of cynicism and fearfulness have already taken root and you shall be a loathsome traveler." A good book, for once I don't have a lot to say about something I have read. While not action-movie standards of adventure, Jenkins did describe an interesting experience. While he didn't give as detailed a portrait of the lives of Africans as other books I have read, there were some very memorable scenes and people in this book. I liked reading about the many explorers who attempted the Niger and to reach Timbuktu, though I had read much of that before and in greater detail. I guess what I liked most was his writing style; his put-you-there descriptiveness of what he saw and experienced.

My Dad loved this book. For all the rivers he never paddled it surprised me. But after many years of carrying it from place to place I read it, and then I understood. It wasn't the water, the boats, or Timbuktu, it was simply the act of traveling. We had traveled a lot together and when he didn't go I always made it a point to call him en route. From the Champe De Elysse, a mountain meadow in Yosemite, wherever I was we kept in touch. Mark Jenkins is a veteran traveler and his wife, like my Dad gets the touch via postcard. She knows he'll go, and that they will miss each other, but they made a deal and it works for them so he goes. With descriptions that sometimes seem like poetry Mark draws us along on his trip to the mythical Timbuktu. But that's not the only trip we are on in this book. It is cleverly spliced with other trips from other times, some his, some from famous or almost famous others. The delight is to sift thru these ancillary tales and then drop back into the current tent, village, or boat. Of course we have to have traveling companions and our group is like most, sometimes adversarial, but mostly content to go with the flow, when there is flow, and it's not too...well, you get the picture. Amidst the companions come others to guide, to tote, to banter, to question. All showing up to play their part in the adventure. And like us all wishing it was them that was putting the boat together ready to sail off with the morning dew to places never seen by most but forever to be remembered by my Dad, Mark, his wife, and all those who helped and were touched along the way.

To Timbuktu combines the three things necessary for a great travel book: adventure, history, and humor. The central theme of the book is Jenkins search for the source of the Niger River, but that is merely the rack from which Jenkins explores issues such as friendship, humanity, and cultural differences. That said this book is not dense or slow. In fact it is an extremely quick read. Jenkins writing is sometimes boastful and sometimes self-effacing, but always efficient and entertaining. Some people here have criticized the "machoism" in this book. Maybe I fail to

understand, but if they have problems with him carrying a gun or dancing with "100 naked women", I submit that their criticisms are quibblesome. Carrying a gun may or may not be necessary, but it is beyond a minor part in the book. As for the naked women, my question is: Is it true? If so, why not write it. At heart though, these criticisms miss the greater part of the book which is the interaction between people (Jenkins w/ his fellow travelers, the travelers w/ their guide, previous explorers w/ the indigenous population). It is here where To Timbuktu shines. If their criticism goes deeper then I believe that they fail to understand what travel literature is all about. It is about the quest. The quest to do something you are not quite sure that you can accomplish. The quest to learn about those different than you. If this is "machoism" I hope it lives in us all. To criticize it is to deny the validity of all grasps for greater knowledge about ourself and others. Maybe these people would rather read about my travels from refrigerator to couch to restroom to bed, but I don't think that would make a very interesting travelogue and, while it may be revealing about me, I doubt that it would tell us much about the diverse peoples of the world. Getting off my soapbox, I can sum up, in short, by saying that this book turned me into a connoisseur of travel literature and I am thankful for the experience.

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