

TO TIMBUKTU FOR A HAIRCUT AND



Author and tourism executive, Rick Antonson (left) sets out on an unforgettable journey to Africa, and chronicles his adventures in *TO TIMBUKTU FOR A HAIRCUT: A Journey Through West Africa*, published by Dundurn Press on June 7, 2008.

“To Timbuktu for a Haircut is a great read - a little bit of Bill Bryson, a little bit of Michael Palin, and quite a lot of Bob Hope on the road to Timbuktu.” - Professor Geoffrey Lipman, Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations World Tourism Organization.

Historically rich, remote, and once unimaginably dangerous for travellers, Timbuktu still teases with “Find me if you can.” Rick Antonson’s encounters with entertaining train companions Ebou and Ussegnou, a mysterious cook called Nema, and intrepid guide Zak will make you want to pack up and leave for Timbuktu tomorrow. As Antonson travels in Senegal and Mali by train, four-wheel drive, river pinasse, camel, and foot, he tells of fourteenth-century legends, eighteenth-century explorers, and today’s endangered existence of Timbuktu’s 700,000 ancient manuscripts in what scholars have described as the most important archaeological discovery since the Dead Sea Scrolls.

TO TIMBUKTU FOR A HAIRCUT combines wry humour with shrewd observation to deliver an armchair experience that will linger in the mind long after the last page is read. “I left Africa personally changed by the gentle harshness I found and a disquieting splendour that found me. Mali was the journey I needed, if not the one I envisioned. And I learned that there’s a little of Timbuktu in every traveller: the over-anticipated experience, the clash of dreams with reality.” – Rick Antonson

Rick Antonson is the president and CEO of Tourism Vancouver and a director of the Pacific Asia Travel Association. He has had adven-

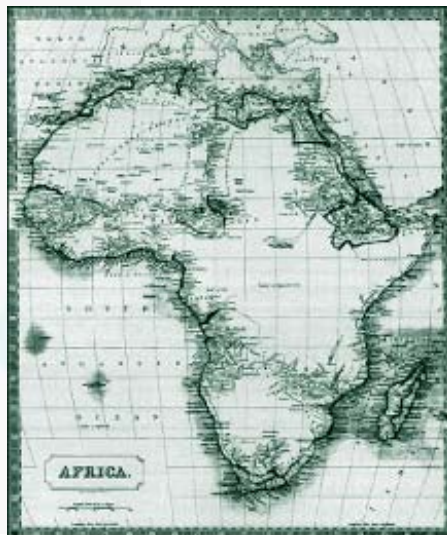
tures in Tibet and Nepal, and in Libya and North Korea, among others. The co-author of *SLUMACH’S GOLD: In Search of a Legend*, he lives in Vancouver.

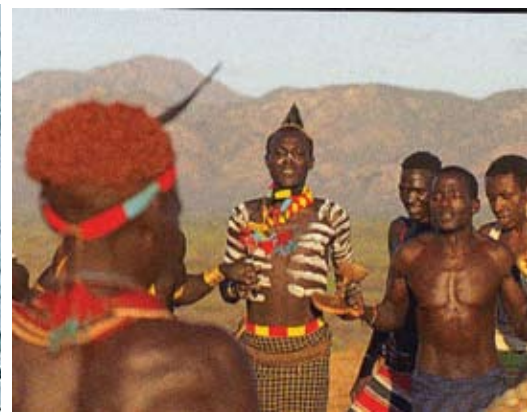
From the Vancouver Sun

It may seem counterintuitive, but the appeal of travel literature often has less to do with the destination in question than with the character of the traveller. Thus, while there may be significant geographical overlap, there is a vast difference, for example, between Frances Mayes’s *Tuscany* (in the best-selling *Under the Tuscan Sun*) and Ferenc Máté’s *Tuscany* (in the equally impressive but less commercially successful *The Hills of Tuscany*). In each book, the milieu serves as a backdrop for the revelation and development of the author’s persona. The reader responds not to the locale but to the locale as experienced by the narrator.

This may seem a minor distinction, but it’s crucial, especially when you consider both the number of new travel accounts published each year and the fact that the world is a finite place with, sadly, few remaining mysteries. The age of strict geographic exploration is long gone, but the potential for personal explorations through geography is practically limitless.

Two new books from B.C. writers nicely underscore this point, to varying degrees of effect. In exploring two of the





OTHER HAIR-RAISING ADVENTURES

world's less-travelled places, Rick Antonson and Martin Mitchinson also explore themselves.

About Rick Antonson

Tourism Vancouver president and CEO Rick Antonson travels for a living, "flying a hundred thousand kilometres each year for two decades," moving from conference to air-conditioned hotel room with seasoned thoughtlessness.

When it came time for him to take a month-long solo expedition, however, he decided almost on a whim to journey to one of the most fabled -- and forbidding -- destinations in the world: Timbuktu.

Few places are quite as evocative and mysterious. A centre of Islamic scholarship and culture during the 15th and 16th centuries, Timbuktu has long been a beacon for travellers. Once thought of as a source of unimaginable riches, the city today is impoverished, threatened by the encroaching Sahara Desert.

For this trip, Antonson decided against his usual air travel and instead made the journey on the ground: by train, boat, car, camel and foot. The result, as recounted in his impressive new book, *To Timbuktu for a Haircut*, is a quixotic quest, alternately funny and thought-provoking.

Readers follow his journey chronologically as he moves toward the city and then as it recedes behind him. His account is threaded through with historical and cultural information. Curiously, his encounter with the city itself is almost anticlimactic. He clearly relishes the journey, and his fellow travellers, more than the destination.

From a ride up the River Niger to an open-air music festival in the desert, from the sudden close friendships that bloom during such travel to the machinations of an unscrupulous tour coordinator who seems intent on foiling his travel goals at every juncture, Antonson handles the joys and occasional frustrations of his trip in vivid, straightforward prose and with a wry sense of humour.

Pearl of the Desert

Timbuktu was formerly a great commercial trading city and an international center of Islamic learning. The city was probably founded in the late 11th century AD by Tuareg nomads. Timbuktu was a leading terminus of trans-Saharan caravans and a distribution point for trade along the upper Niger. Merchants from northern African cities traded salt and cloth for gold and for black African slaves in the markets of Timbuktu. The visitors will discover the ancient mosques including the famous Sankore whose reputation spanned all across north Africa and Europe as a leading Islamic academy for centuries. Most of the ancient books (some dating from the 14th century AD) are still preserved at the Ahmed Baba Center. Tuareg formed one of the most ancient tribal people of the Sahara. They speak a Berber language, Tamacheq, and have their own alphabet. In ancient times, the Tuareg controlled the trans-Sahara routes and substantially contributed in the expansion of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa even though they retained however some of their older rites. Today, the Tuareg symbolize the mysteries of the Sahara and Masters of the Desert. The city of Mopti is known as the "Venice of Mali". Mopti is situated at the confluence of the Bani and Niger rivers, and is built on several interconnected islands. It is from the river that one can best observe the commercial and social activities of the town. Mopti is literally teeming with traditional traders offering a variety of locally-produced commodities and beautiful artifacts.

Desert Festival in Mali

Jan. 8-10, 2009. To be held in the desert oasis Essakane, 65 kilometers from Timbuktu. For details visit www.africa-ata.org/mali.htm or www.sagatours.com/essakane.html