

## Salt Traders

by Paul Beelitz, adapted from: <http://www.cobblestoneonline.net> (edited).



Timbuktu sounds like a faraway place at the end of the world, but it is actually a city in Mali, West Africa, that lies at one end of an important trade route across the Sahara Desert. Along this route, the Tuareg people of North Africa travel, sometimes with as many as twenty-five thousand camels in their caravans, trading as they go with the people who live at each oasis (place with available water).

For many centuries, the Tuareg have been nomads who move great distances from one season to the next and regularly cross the vast stretches of the Sahara. The Tuareg maintain a trade network among the many peoples of North Africa, providing those who stay in one place with some of the things they require for everyday life. The camel, traveling companion to the Tuareg, was tamed centuries ago, and the Tuareg's ancestors made it their chief form of desert transportation. The camel's body is adapted to make the best use of the water it drinks so that it can go for long periods between drinks.

The combination of the Tuareg people and camels is ideal for trade, enabling them to move through the desert with little fear of the weather. They have conquered the Sahara Desert despite its ever-shifting sand dunes, vast expanses of rough gravel, unforgiving sandstorms, and an average rainfall of less than one inch per year.

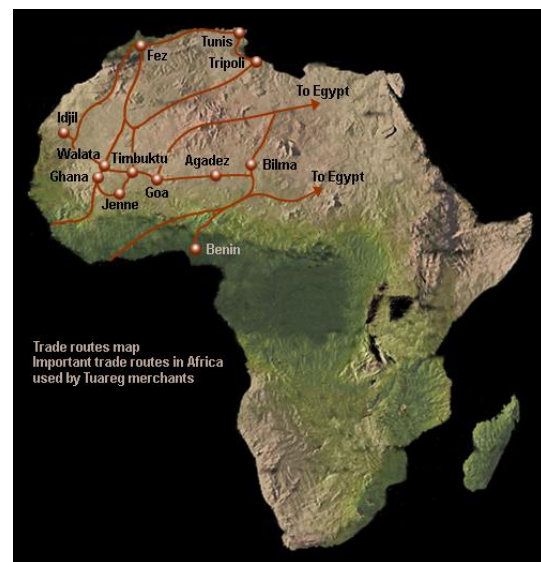


There are no refrigerators in the desert, and meat spoils very quickly if it is not kept cold. Salt is very important to desert peoples because it can be used to cure and preserve meat despite the heat. One of the many trade networks begins near the great Taodeni salt mine in Mali, the greatest source of salt in the Sahara Desert.

One thousand miles long, the Taoudeni Trail begins in Abuam in Morocco, passes through the Taodeni salt mine, and continues on south to Timbuktu in Mali. Camel caravans leave the salt mine with slabs of salt, often covered with mud that is allowed to dry. The hardened mud protects the slabs from being battered to bits by the wind-blown sand and from dissolving should rain happen to fall. At the different oases along the trail, the Tuareg trade their salt for water, animal hides, livestock, dates, dried meat, and milk products.

When the caravan finally arrives in Timbuktu, it still has plenty of salt to trade in the town. By now it also has dates, animal hides, and other products received in exchange for salt at the oases. The town people, in exchange for some of the goods the Tuareg have brought, have much to offer in return. In the market section of town, the Tuareg can trade for glass bracelets, gunpowder, clothing, peanuts, sugar cane, tea, grain, dried herbs, basketry, and clay vessels.

Loaded down with the products they have received, the Tuareg return north to the Sahara, where they stop at many of the same oases they passed through on their way south. The oasis-dwelling people of the desert are happy to receive the agricultural produce and handicrafts of Timbuktu. Finally, after thousands of miles of travel, the caravan arrives back at the Taoudeni salt mine to trade what remains for more salt, and they prepare for a new journey like the one they began the year before.



Today, most trading has been taken away from the Tuareg. In the past, the desert was impassable to modern vehicles such as trucks. Recently, however, paved highways for trucks and modern airports for jets have been built. Still, engines overheat and tires explode in the desert heat, and the wind-blown sand clogs truck and airplane engines so much that they cannot get enough air to run properly. Thus, even with these conveniences, the Sahara Desert is only tamed, not conquered. It seems that there will always be a need for the Tuareg and their camels.

